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LITTLE EGRETS BY JAMES LOWEN

AT a time when more people than ever are engaging with the conservation movement, the challenges and setbacks it faces also seem greater than before.

In April, despite a turning tide of local opinion against the killing of migrating birds in spring in Malta, a referendum on the issue handed victory to the hunters. Little comfort that a 0.3 per cent swing in the vote would have been enough to see the controversial practice banned: the slightest majority was all the hunters needed. Democracy can be a painful process sometimes.

The same could be said for the UK's recent general election, in which almost no one outside the Green Party bothered to campaign on environmental issues. Our own democratic process has awarded the new government an outright majority for 37 per cent of the vote, and we now face the prospect of deregulated rural development, badger culling across the country, the return of fox hunting and, as Prime Minister David Cameron so famously put it, the cutting of "green crap".

Threats to wildlife also come from the headquarters of the European Union, where in its less than infinite wisdom Brussels has decided to conduct a euphemistically named 'fitness check' on the Birds and Habitats Directives, the cornerstones of nature conservation across the continent. The move is considered serious enough by the RSPB to be described as the "single biggest threat to UK and European nature and biodiversity in a generation". It has also mobilised 100 voluntary groups from across the UK to join forces and defend laws which surely need strengthening, not weakening.

You can read more about this important story on page 86 and find out about its potential impact on bird conservation at home and abroad. The EU has now started the public consultation process, and it's important that we all make our voices heard – no one else will stick up for birds if we don't. Please give your opinions at **www.naturealert.eu**.

Dominic Mitchell

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SPOONBILL BY LISA GEOGHEGAN

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DIMITRIS FOTIOU

Hitch-hiking flycatcher

The Greek island of Lesvos is well known as one of the hottest of Mediterranean migration hot-spots, and among the many species that may be seen in spring are all three of the 'old school' European black-and-white *Ficedula* flycatchers: Pied, Collared and Semicollared. The last species occurs in small numbers, but the other two make up the bulk and can occur in their hundreds in influx years, such as 2011.

This year, the island played host to a particularly impressive arrival on 8 April, as very wet weather created a fall of Pied and Collared Flycatchers, and there were possibly thousands across the Greek islands according to the few birders ensconced there. The conditions caused some birds to seek unlikely shelter, like this stunning male Collared Flycatcher which sought refuge in a local birder's car and showed no fear of either its surroundings or its human companions. Another of the species was reported to have hidden out inside someone's house.

By the next day many had moved on and the birds were back to more like their usual numbers as the weather cleared up over the following week. ■

The Alps come to Norfolk

Britain's second Citril Finch was probably among the least expected rarities to be found in an extensive Norfolk dune system, as **Marcus Nash** birded it on his day off from guiding.

Citril Finch: Burnham Overy Dunes, Norfolk, 10-11 May 2015

AFTER Britain's first Citril Finch turned up on Fair Isle, Shetland, in June 2008, the formerly dismissed 'Hastings Rarity' had shown that it really should be on birders' radars, and that the species can indeed wander far from its natural montane abode. Tour group leader Marcus Nash was to find this out for himself on Sunday 10 May.

With migrants arriving on the east coast on the previous evening, he got an early start at the migrant hot-spot of Holkham Pines, quickly making his way to Burnham Overy Dunes, seeing very little at first.

Checking a probable Robin he had flushed at the top of the dunes, a second bird was also flushed, this one showing an off-yellow rump, dark tail and greyish-green back. Already aware that this wasn't a Greenfinch, Siskin

The fact that the Citril Finch was found on a mild Sunday and stayed loyal to the same small area meant that many birders within reasonable driving distance were able to connect with ease. Latecomers the next day were mostly out of luck.

Inset: superficially similar to Siskin, the grey nape and cheeks and duller green rump make Citril Finch stand out.

JAMES HANLON

MARK RAYMENT

ANDREW EASTON

The faintly streaked green mantle is diagnostic of Citril Finch – Siskin has bolder streaks, while the limited range Corsican Finch (never recorded in Britain) has a Linnet-like brown mantle.

JAMES HANLON

The geographical origins of this adult male Citril Finch are unknown, but it should really have been setting up a breeding territory in the Alps or Pyrenees when it was hopping around the north Norfolk dunes.

or European Serin, Marcus saw it land in a low bush about 30 m away, revealing itself to be a bright male Citril Finch, a species he had seen before in the Alps.

Clearly a photo was in order for such a rare species, and despite having his trusty bridge camera, a spur-of-the-moment decision made him attempt a digiscoped record shot with his scope. Inevitably, the bird was disturbed by walkers as he set up the equipment and it disappeared.

As well as the need to document such a mega sighting, it would also be a good idea to eliminate the possibility of an escaped cagebird – clearly a good number of quality photos would be needed. The search of the huge and almost deserted locale began.

After an hour's searching, and during a pass through the area in which the bird had been discovered, it was flushed again. By this time a couple of other birders were helping with the quest, and soon the finch landed right in front of them, where they were able to ascertain that it was unringed and appeared to be in pristine condition. The Citril Finch then flew off towards the pines.

News was then put out, but the bird did not show again for a couple of anxious hours. However, it finally settled to feed in an open area, enabling the 500 or more visiting birders to obtain frame-filling images and get detailed views.

The bird was reported first thing on 11 May, but appeared to have gone for good by 6.50 am to the disappointment of those who couldn't make it until the Monday morning. ■

STATS & FACTS

First recorded: 6-11 June 2008, Fair Isle, Shetland
Previous British records: 1
Previous Irish records: 0
Mega rating: ★★★★★

The overall darker tones extending fully to the end of the undertail region make the Hudsonian Godwit (third from the left) stick out among these Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits.

KIT DAY

A foreigner in the flock

Tom Raven's evening visit to his local patch paid off big time with a mega American wader – but would he be able to confirm its identity and would it return?

Hudsonian Godwit: Meare Heath, Somerset, 25 April and 29 April-3 May 2015

DRIVING back from work through the drizzle on a Friday evening isn't perhaps the best situation to visit your local patch, but that's what Tom Raven did despite not really being in the mood for it. Sometimes these rash decisions pay off, and such was the result when a flock of about 250 Black-tailed Godwits took flight at a distance as he approached the wader scrape.

Even at 250 m, a darker bird stood out among the flock, with not much of a wing-bar. This brief view was enough to quicken Tom's pace and he rushed towards an appropriate watching position as the flock settled onto the scrape once more. The bird would have to be checked for the possibility of being a melanistic 'Blackwit', and was easily picked out from the flock on the mud by its overall darker tones.

Interest was now piqued, as the godwit showed a dark blood-red chest and belly with heavy barring, which extended onto its undertail. A grey face and neck also marked it out, and the back pattern also looked darker than the adjacent Black-tailed Godwits. It was becoming apparent that Hudsonian Godwit might be the only explanation, but the diagnostic black underwing would have to be seen.

As the immediate area was in

DAVID H HATTON (WWW.KOWAPOWER.COM)

Not a suite of species often seen together, and perhaps unprecedented, the adult female Hudsonian Godwit roosted between its Black-tailed congener (left) and a Wood Sandpiper (right), but could still be picked out by patient observers by its full belly streaking and overall darker, greyer tones.

Inevitably with such a long-staying bird at a popular reserve, the Hudsonian Godwit was well attended by all ages of birder, with many of the younger generation getting a 'grip back' on the only previous birds in the 1980s.

Inset: despite spending most of its time among Black-tailed Godwits, its stay wasn't always peaceful and it was sometimes shown some antagonism on the feeding grounds.

The really eye-catching diagnostic feature of Hudsonian Godwit is its dark, almost sooty, underwing coverts, seen here to full effect in this fly-past with Black-tailed Godwits.

MIKE ROBERTS

MIKE ROBERTS

a phone black-spot, Tom stayed put hoping to see more of the bird, finally giving up after dusk, in a quandary about whether to report it as a Hudsonian, or wait until morning to firm up the ID.

With about 100 Black-tailed Godwits on site as he arrived at 5 am the next day, in good light, signs were positive that it would be found again, but it couldn't be seen at first. Fortunately, the entire flock then rose into the air, and Tom spotted the darker bird, which swung round to reveal the hoped-for dark underwing. Hudsonian Godwit in the bag!

With the news then released, many hundreds of birders managed to add the species to their British lists over the following week or so, despite it disappearing for three days after it was first identified.

A few of those who visited may have been fortunate enough to see the first British individual, a returning bird which was seen at both Humberside and Devon, but with more than three decades passing since that event and the second being brief in north-east Scotland, this bird was a very welcome find indeed. ■

DAVID H HATTON (WWW.KOWAPOWER.COM)

STATS & FACTS

First recorded: Blacktoft Sands RSPB, East Yorks, 10 September-3 October 1981 and 26 April-6 May 1983, plus Exeter, Devon, 22 November 1981-14 January 1982

Last recorded: Collieston, Aberdeeenshire, 26 September 1988

Previous British records: 2

Mega rating: ★★★★★

FINDER'S REPORT

Thriller in the mist

Photographer ***Cavell Smith*** relates the story of how he independently came across a vagrant Yank heron, while on the opposite page, ***Richard Bonser*** tells of the highs and lows of the ensuing twitch.

CAVELL SMITH

Emerging from the evening mist, the Great Blue Heron looks positively antediluvian as it prowls the mud of Lower Moors on St Mary's, which it would make its on-and-off home for most of its stay on Scilly.

Inset: the rufous tinge to its shoulder is part of the bird's encroaching adult plumage developing through its first winter.

Great Blue Heron: St Mary's, Scilly, 14 April-7 May 2015

JOSH JONES

AS a wildlife photographer, I thought in the late afternoon of 14 April I would spend some time at the Isles of Scilly Bird Group Hide on Lower Moors. Over the previous few days, dense fog had descended on the islands, but as I approached the hides the sun was starting to break through.

At 6.45 pm, I was looking out of the window onto the misty scrape, but there were no notable photographic subjects. I had been in the hide for 10 minutes when two large herons silently flew in and landed on the scrape in front of me. I immediately noticed that one of the birds was a Grey Heron, but the other was noticeably larger in size and darker in colour. I paid more attention to this individual as it struck me as something different – I had never come across a heron like this before.

For the next 25 minutes the smaller Grey Heron remained agitated and flew aggressively towards the larger bird, pushing it around the scrape. On a few occasions they flew out of my field of view, only to return again. Both birds were vocal and five minutes more of this aggression was enough to make the other heron fly off out of sight.

Very shortly afterwards a birder burst into the hide. He was very excited and he asked me if he could review the images that I had taken with my camera. He looked closely at my shots and said he was 90 per cent sure that it was a Great Blue Heron from North America, and only the second ever to be recorded in Britain!

Wow! I had known it was something of interest, but I didn't think that this bird was going to be as unusual and rare as that. The birder introduced himself as Ashley Fisher and then called another local birder. He then returned to the hide but spotted the heron flying off south towards Old Town Bay. Shortly afterwards, Nigel Hudson arrived and he also looked at my images, but neither of them were 100 per cent convinced. They sped down to Old Town Bay to search for the heron and the rest, as they say, is history.

Later, I looked at my images' metadata, and noted that I had observed the Great Blue Heron from 6.56-7.30 pm, a total of 34 minutes. The heron in question was still being considered locally as a possible Great Blue by resident birders, but soon the identification was confirmed, the bird being aged as a first-winter. This Great Blue Heron was discovered in virtually the same spot as Ashley had found the first in December 2007!

Later, I heard that Bob Dawson and Graham Gordon had seen an interesting heron on St Agnes early on 13 April. Having considered Great Blue Heron, they managed to talk themselves out of it in the fog. Any claim of Great Blue based on their limited views and the apparently atypical thighs would have been dismissed. To say then that these observers were relieved to catch up with the heron would be an understatement!

Seeing the bird was a fantastic experience, and was certainly the cherry on top of my photographic day. ■

STATS & FACTS

First recorded: 7 December 2007, Lower Moors, St Mary's, Scilly
Previous British records: 1
Previous Irish records: 0
Mega rating: ★★★★★

JAMES LOWEN

The twitch is on!

'WHERE will Britain's first Great Blue Heron turn up?' used to be a conversation you'd have during those long overnight drives, writes *Richard Bonser*. Following an intense Atlantic low pressure system, diligent Scilly birder Ashley Fisher eyeballed an exhausted first-winter from the hide at Lower Moors during the afternoon of Friday 7 December 2007. The next morning, Britain's keenest listers congregated in the hope that the weather would abate enough to get across on the plane or helicopter. There must have been 100 or so birders, and we all feared the biggest variable was going to be the weather, not the bird actually being there.

Transport links to Scilly did us proud, with everyone getting on. However, there was no bird. Not at Lower Moors, not anywhere. Compounding the disappointment, the weather intensified and everyone was stranded until at least Monday. Waves lapped over the roof of The Mermaid in Hugh Town, and at times I was struggling to stand up, so there probably wasn't much chance of a young, emaciated heron making it through those wild conditions.

Roll on to Tuesday 14 April 2015, and with no Great Blue Herons in between, lightning struck twice. Ashley Fisher had jointly found another one, again at Lower Moors on St Mary's. With the bird moving the short distance to Old Town Bay, and present into darkness, it was time for another attempt to get it on my list. The drive down overnight was foggy and hard work. Low cloud had been hanging over Scilly and flights had been grounded for the past couple of days, so the *Scillonian* was the only option.

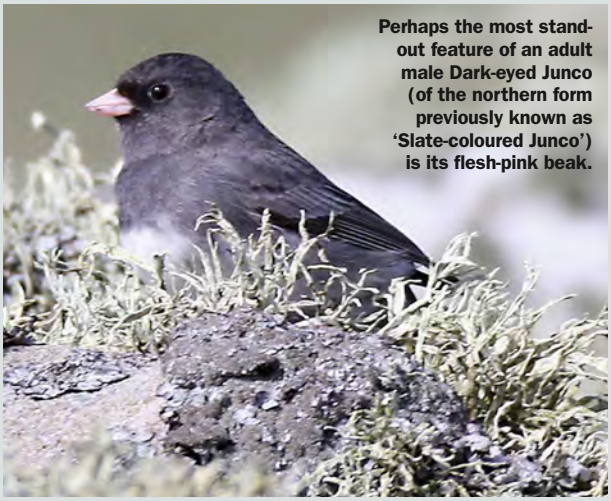
Next morning, the heron was still in Old Town Bay when we set sail from Penzance. However, as we docked at the quay in Hugh Town, the news wasn't good – there'd been no sign of the bird for an hour or so. With only four hours on the island, and a genuine sense of *déjà vu*, it felt like desperate times. I walked around Peninnis scouring the coast, then to Porthloo via Lower Moors.

With less than an hour to play with before we needed to be back on the boat, the bird was relocated in a field at the far end of Holy Vale. Cue the call for taxis and a mad dash. However, for all the effort, it had once again flown, with just a few people getting flight views in the mist. It wasn't a happy sailing back to Penzance, before a long drive to London for commitments I couldn't get out of the next day.

Many stayed on that evening, scouring the islands the following day without success, until news reached them as they were docking back in Penzance. A member of the public had posted a picture of the heron sitting happily on Bryher! Some decided enough was enough, while others went back for day three. And following another night spent on the A303 and A30, for me it was *Scillonian* crossing number three in three days.

With positive news coming through again and again, after the last couple of days, things still weren't being taken for granted. However, once the *Scillonian* docked, we sailed over to Bryher pretty quickly and a brisk stroll over to Big Pool revealed a very large, dark heron. Life was good, the pressure was off and I soaked in some nice views of Britain's second Great Blue Heron, as it sheltered from the rain before fishing actively. After last autumn, it was really good to see a near mythical bird (in a British context) on these magical isles once again. ■

FINDER'S REPORT



Perhaps the most stand-out feature of an adult male Dark-eyed Junco (of the northern form previously known as 'Slate-coloured Junco') is its flesh-pink beak.

DONALD ROBERTSON

Junco in my back garden

Donald Robertson **spotted an unusual bird the first time he looked out of his window one morning.**

Dark-eyed Junco: Toab, Shetland, 11 May 2015

I was delighted to find this Dark-eyed Junco in the garden when I first looked out of the kitchen window on the morning of 11 May. At the time I realised I hadn't ever seen any kind of bird resembling this one, so I had a quick look through my books of British and European birds with no success.

I then did a quick search on the internet, but realised that would take too long. I decided to post a photo on the Nature in Shetland Facebook page with a request for the bird to be identified. I had an almost instant response from Mark Reeder, saying that it was a Dark-eyed Junco, and he contacted Rob Fray at Virkie. I was able to show Rob where the Dark-eyed Junco was so that he could formally identify it. I believe this is the fifth record for Shetland and the first since 2003.

I think it made quite a few people happy here during its stay, and the weather was perfect as well. ■

STATS & FACTS

First recorded: Dungeness, Kent, 26 May 1960
Previous British records: 38
Previous Irish records: 3
Mega rating: ★★★★☆

A slate-grey, finch-like bird with a pink bill, pale belly and black face mask can only be one sex of one species: male Dark-eyed Junco.

ROGER RIDDINGTON

Rarities: April 2015

Yank spring

Two mega-rare American vagrants pitched up in a month usually associated with European overshoots, writes ***Josh Jones***.

KIT DAY

One of the biggest birds of the month was Britain's third Hudsonian Godwit (a female, fourth from left), which socialised with Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits at Meare Heath, Somerset, until 3 May.

April isn't a month that you'd normally associate with a sumptuous cast of Nearctic vagrants, yet that's what was on offer this month, with two particularly stunning vagrants from across the pond.

The discovery of Britain's second Great Blue Heron on St Mary's, Scilly, late on 14th was a massive surprise (see pages 12-13) during a largely warm and settled period of weather otherwise dominated by good numbers of returning migrants in south-west England and southern Ireland. The heron's occurrence is surrounded by amazing coincidences: not only did it appear on the same island as Britain's only other record, but was also identified by the same observer.

After initially playing cat-and-mouse, the well-twitched bird spent much of its time on Bryher's Big Pool, indulging in occasional forays to Tresco and back to St Mary's (including a more prolonged stay from 27th to the month's end. Aside from its occasional inter-island movements, the heron seems quite settled and it's entirely possible that it could linger there for weeks to come – a number of previous Azorean records have involved birds staying for long periods.

In the final week of the month, the heron was sensationally upstaged by the sudden appearance of a stunning female Hudsonian Godwit at Meare Heath, Somerset, on 25th (see pages 10-11). The bird had first been seen late on the evening of 24th but, with views inconclusive, the finder sensibly decided to wait until the following morning to shore up the identification and release the news. Many hundreds enjoyed respectable views throughout 25th as it associated with a contingent of Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits.

Wild godwit chase

The bird's sudden decision to fly off late afternoon seemingly appeared to be the last anyone would see of it, particularly as it wasn't present the following day. However, on 29th it took many by surprise by reappearing on the lagoon at Meare, where it remained to 3 May. This is Britain's third record, assuming that sightings from Devon in 1981 and East Yorkshire in 1981 and 1983 all relate to the same individual.

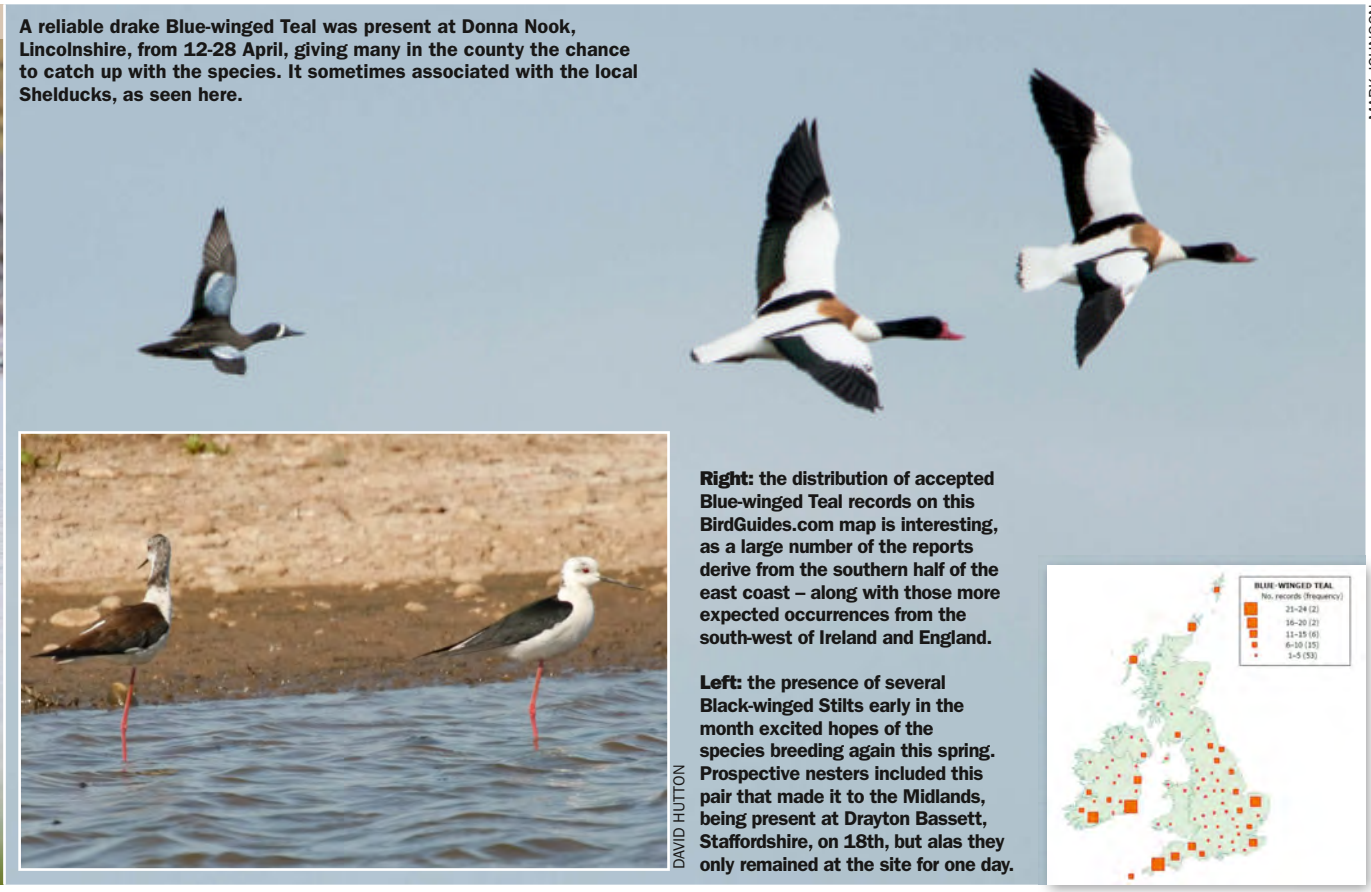
KRIS WEBB

Scilly's Great Blue Heron – photographed here at its regular hang-out at Lower Moors – was the second for both the archipelago and Britain, and became eminently twitchable once it had settled down after its discovery.

There were two records of Pied-billed Grebe this month, though realistically it would appear that just one individual was involved. On 24th a breeding-plumaged bird was found on the estuary at Berkeley, Glos, where it lingered throughout the day and showed fairly well, representing the first for the county. It had moved on by the next morning, though it wasn't long before the species was once again making the airwaves on BirdGuides.com. Late afternoon on Saturday, a Pied-billed was found at Leighton Moss, Lancs, and lingered until the end of the month.

Both of Scotland's long-staying Harlequin Ducks lingered throughout April. After a 10-day absence during which almost everyone accepted that it had moved on, it was a real surprise to see the young drake back on the River Don in Aberdeen from 26th. The female at Brora, Highland, was reported with greater regularity as the month wore on, presumably due to an increase in birders out enjoying the various delights of the Scottish spring.

Following reports of other drakes at two sites in Moray and Nairn on 4th, it was great to hear that 'Elvis' the King Eider had returned to the Ythan Estuary, Aberdeens, on 5th, where he



A reliable drake Blue-winged Teal was present at Donna Nook, Lincolnshire, from 12-28 April, giving many in the county the chance to catch up with the species. It sometimes associated with the local Shelducks, as seen here.

MARK JOHNSON

DAVID HUTTON

Left: the presence of several Black-winged Stilts early in the month excited hopes of the species breeding again this spring. Prospective nesters included this pair that made it to the Midlands, being present at Drayton Bassett, Staffordshire, on 18th, but alas they only remained at the site for one day.

Right: the distribution of accepted Blue-winged Teal records on this BirdGuides.com map is interesting, as a large number of the reports derive from the southern half of the east coast – along with those more expected occurrences from the south-west of Ireland and England.

GRAHAM JEPSON

This Greater Yellowlegs reappeared at Titchfield Haven, Hampshire, on 11 April, and was seen on several subsequent dates.

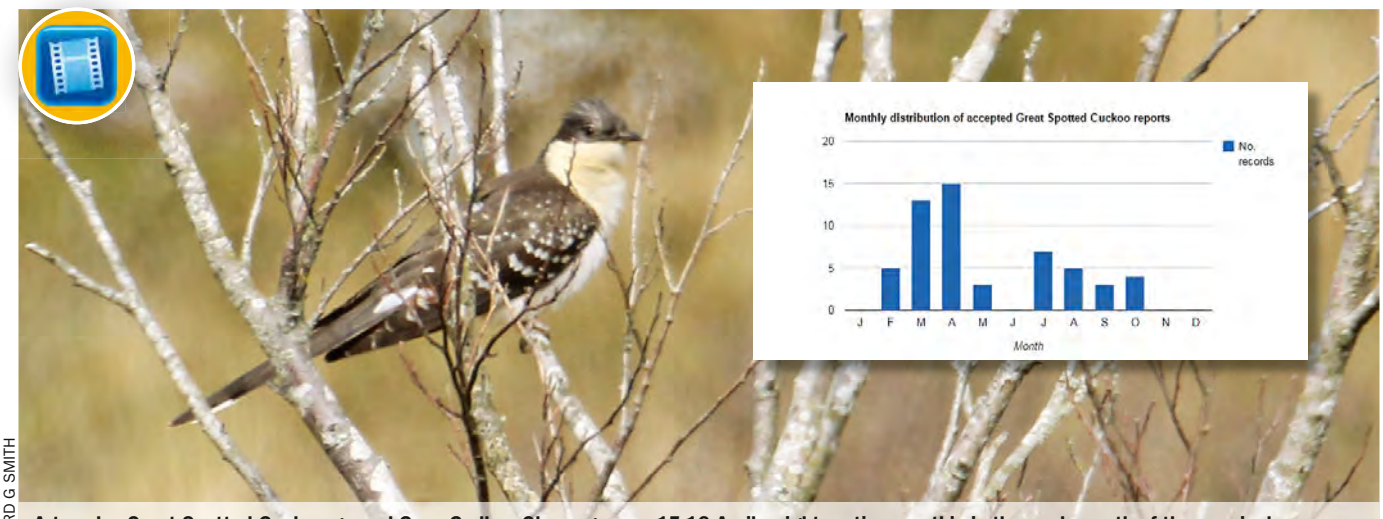
remained throughout April, giving stunning views at times. A female lingered off Ruddon's Point, Fife, to 7th, while the Black Scoter was last reported off Rossbeigh, Co Kerry, on 3rd.

Scilly continued to entertain the American Black Duck for much of the month; it spent most of its time on Tresco's Abbey Pool until the final sighting on 21st. News from Strontian, Highland, concerned the continued presence of the adult drake there in April, once again paired with a female Mallard – June will mark the eighth anniversary of its first appearance.

A drake Blue-winged Teal was found on coastal pools at Donna Nook, Lincs, on 12th and lingered until the end of the month, while the Orkney bird was last seen at The Shunan on 12th.

In the Outer Hebrides, the wintering American Coot was last noted at Balranald, North Uist, on 3rd.

A white-morph Gyr Falcon was again on Inishbofin, Co Galway, on 7th, while both Co Clare and Co Mayo logged Snowy Owls. The former was on the hills above Ballyvaughan from 11-20th; presumably the same individual



RICHARD G SMITH

A two-day Great Spotted Cuckoo graced Cwm Cadlan, Glamorgan, on 15-16 April – right on time, as this is the peak month of the species' occurrence, as can be seen from the BirdGuides.com histogram above. Regular February arrivals also make this one of our earliest vagrants.

was also reported in this area during summer 2014. The second, another male, was seen atop Termon Hill at the south end of the Mullet peninsula on 26th and is the first reported in this region since the long-staying female was last noted in July 2012.

April's influx suggests it may be another good year for Black-winged Stilts, and the month produced a bewildering array of records as wandering pairs and groups penetrated as far north as Cheshire. Following the first of the spring at Abbotsbury, Dorset, from 3rd, six were found at Higham Marshes, Kent, on 14th. An amazing eight were seen there the following day but soon dispersed – just two remained to 19th. What were presumably some of these birds were seen at nearby Northward Hill on 16th and Cliffe Pools on 18-19th; two at Dungeness on 17th may also have been part of the flock. Two spent a week at Bowers Marsh, Essex, and three were briefly on the Nene Washes, Cambs, early on 16th, with two apparently different birds nearby on 17th. What may have been this latter pair then pitched up at Drayton Bassett, Staffs, on 18th and Ashton's Flash, Cheshire, on 19th. Meanwhile, in West Sussex, at least one (probably two) remained in the Medmerry and Pagham area until 19th. A pair was also at Trimley Marshes, Suffolk, on 26th.

Almost overlooked amid April's excitement was the reappearance of Hampshire's Greater Yellowlegs at Titchfield Haven on 11th – three months to the day since the initial sighting. It then showed from 19-21st and briefly on 25th, but not again by the end of the month. The wintering Lesser Yellowlegs was in Co Dublin to 14th, while another graced Wheldrake Ings, North Yorks, on 15th.

Cheshire's Laughing Gull became a little more restless as April wore on, making several sorties to Seaforth, Lancs, before its final appearance at New Brighton on 20th. The ever-present Co Cork bird, now in second-summer plumage, remained at Ballycotton throughout. The second-winter American Herring Gull was reported from at least a couple of sites in west Cornwall during the first half of the month, while the first-winter was again at Cahermore, Co Cork, on 19th. Bonaparte's Gulls were seen in Dorset, Glamorgan, Argyll and Co Waterford.

This brief Yellow Wagtail appeared to fit all the criteria for 'Spanish Wagtail', including call, when it was found at Filey, North Yorkshire, on 22nd.

MARK JAMES PEARSON

Rare overshoots

A Gull-billed Tern was in ploughed fields near Three Burrows, Cornwall, on 14th, with presumably the same bird then at Walmsley Sanctuary briefly on 19th. An apparent Eastern Common Tern was photographed among recently arrived Common Terns on Coquet Island, Northumberland, on 15th.

ALLAN CHARD

Exciting southern overshoots included a Eurasian Scops Owl found on Great Saltee Island, Co Wexford, on 11th. Discovered on the island early in the afternoon, it was clearly a fresh arrival, though such sparsely vegetated terrain was not to its liking and it moved off just as quickly as it was found.

Arguably the best discovery of the following week was a Great Spotted Cuckoo well inland at Cwm Cadlan, Glamorgan, late on 15th. A county first, it lingered throughout the following day, though proved typically mobile and restless, rarely posing for photographs. Though still present early on 17th, it was seen to fly off purposefully in the morning and didn't return. Earlier in the month a convincing description was received of a Crag Martin in Bonchurch, Isle of Wight, although the bird wasn't seen for longer than a few minutes during the sunny afternoon of 7th.

Brief sightings included a fly-over Red-throated Pipit at Hengistbury Head, Dorset, on 24th and an apparent Spanish Wagtail at Filey, North Yorks, for a matter of minutes on 22nd. An Eastern Subalpine Warbler was identified at Nanjizal, Cornwall, and lingered for two days from 19th. ■

• For full details of all April's sightings, go to www.birdguides.com. To receive free illustrated weekly sightings summaries and other news, sign up at bit.ly/BGWeeklyNews.

This roosting one-day Eurasian Scops Owl was found and photographed on the notable migration island of Great Saltee, Co Wexford, on 11th.

TOM SHEVLIN (WWW.WILDLIFESNAPS.COM)

The movements of a Pied-billed Grebe were partially traced from 24th, when it was first discovered at Berkeley Power Station, Gloucestershire – where it is pictured – to Leighton Moss RSPB, Lancashire, into May.

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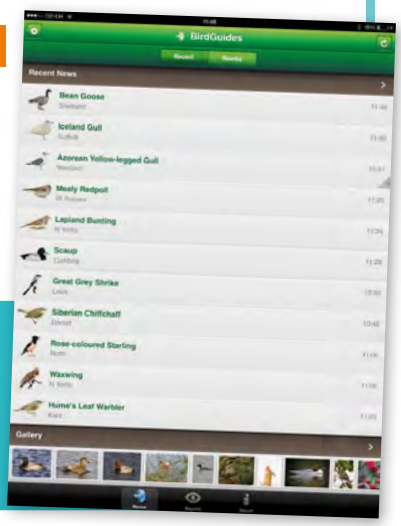

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Scarcities: April 2015

Cock-a-Hoopoe!

As spring migrants and overshoots arrived in numbers, there was an impressive influx of Hoopoes, writes ***Josh Jones***.

A notable influx of Hoopoes occurred in April, and included this bird being harried by a Sparrowhawk at Mizen Head, Co Cork, on 8th. The county held at least 28 birds out of the minimum of 95 seen in Britain and Ireland.

CALEB KNIGHT

One of April's big talking points was a quite amazing influx of Hoopoes, unprecedented this century. Bar a couple of birds on Scilly, the first week was devoid of the species, but the second week saw a mass arrival, with a conservative 95 birds reported – in reality, hundreds must have been present.

Scoring heavily was Scilly with a minimum of 18 birds – at least 11 were on St Mary's alone. Western Cornwall bagged a similar number, but it was really Co Cork that figured highest, with an absolute minimum of 28 seen, although the true total must have been many times more. Neighbouring Co Waterford scored half a dozen, Co Wexford seven and Co Kerry four, with a single report from Co Limerick. From then on birds continued to spread north and eastwards, with several reported as far north as Scotland by the end of the month.

Wrynecks also did well throughout April, and although not as numerous as Hoopoes at least 50 were tallied by the end of the month following the first on St Agnes, Scilly, on 7th. Typically, most were in the far south and south-west, as were the first Golden Orioles of the year, of which around a dozen were reported. Birds were almost exclusively restricted to Scilly, with a peak day count of three on Bryher on 24th, though there were also reports from Cornwall and Co Wexford.

Typical April scarcities were otherwise fairly thin on the ground; a stunning male White-spotted Bluethroat inland at Amwell NR, Herts, on the evening of 13th was particularly notable, while another was brief at Faversham Creek, Kent, that morning. A third Bluethroat was at Bowness-on-Solway, Cumbria, on 8th and, going by its date, was surely also a 'white-spot'. A further bird was trapped on St Mary's, Scilly, on 25th.

Red-rumps whizz through

Just a handful of Alpine Swifts were seen, with birds at Flamborough Head, East Yorks, on 11th and Rutland Water on 14th the only ones to linger just about long enough to be twitchable. The first Red-rumped Swallow of the year was at Mizen Head, Co Cork, on 9th, followed by around 20 others, though few were twitchable. Two spent a few hours at Heaton Park, Manchester, on 17th, while one was at Radipole Lark, Dorset, on 19th and 22nd. A bird also spent three days on St Agnes, Scilly, late on.

The first European Bee-eaters of 2015 were over Greatham Creek, Co Durham, on 11th and at Rother Valley CP, South Yorks, on 12th. A flock of five in Dover, Kent, on 19th lingered for just a couple of hours and were later seen at Abbot's Wood, East Sussex. Further records concerned two birds in Cornwall and at least one on Tresco and Bryher, Scilly, on 21st.

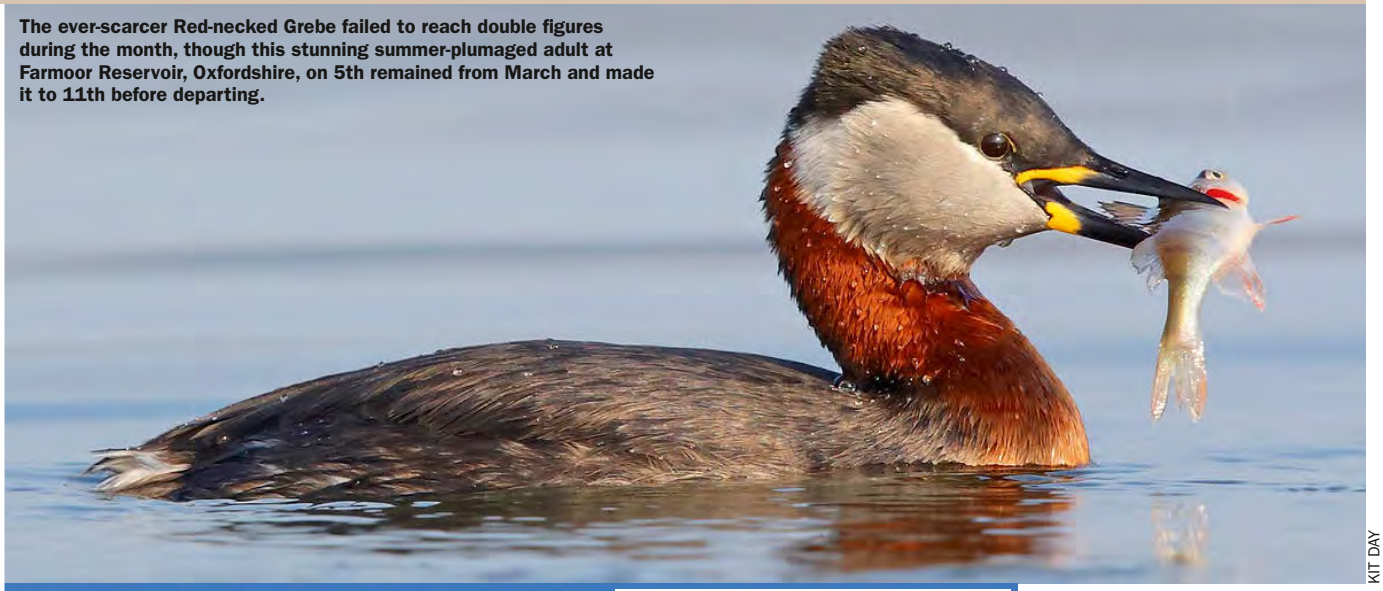
Short-toed Larks graced Scilly, Richard's Pipits were reported in Cornwall, Lancashire – where there were two – and Lincolnshire, while apparent Ashy-headed Wagtails were at Frampton, Lincs, and Burnham Overy, Norfolk.

Two Western Subalpine Warblers spent a few days at Kynance Cove, Cornwall, mid-month, with two further unassigned 'subalps' reported in west Cornwall late on; another Western at Brownstown Head, Co Waterford, showed well for a week from 11th.

A Woodchat Shrike was brief

DUNCAN WATSON

Eight Woodchat Shrikes were logged during the month, including this bird at Porthgwarra, Cornwall, from 27th. Another bird just down the road in Devon was initially believed to be an example of 'Balearic' Woodchat Shrike of the form *badius*, but turned out to be a weakly marked first-summer nominate bird.



The ever-scarcer Red-necked Grebe failed to reach double figures during the month, though this stunning summer-plumaged adult at Farmoor Reservoir, Oxfordshire, on 5th remained from March and made it to 11th before departing.

KIT DAY

MIKE TREW

About 20 Red-rumped Swallows were seen, mostly distributed in the southern and coastal regions of England, as can be seen on this BirdGuides.com map. One of the best sites to catch up with this scarce vagrant is Radipole Lake RSPB, Dorset, where this bird was photographed on 22nd.

ARTO MAATTA

First arriving on 22nd, this approachable and reliable drake American Wigeon at Holywell Pond, Northumberland, lured in many birders during its stay into May, lingering after many Eurasian Wigeon had migrated.

on Cape Clear, Co Cork, on 13th, while another at Soar Mill Cove, Devon, the following day was a little more confiding. Six more followed: a male spent several days on Ramsey Island, Pembs, from 15th, while another was found at nearby Whitesands Bay on 16th and lingered to 20th. A third Pembrokeshire record came from Cwm yr Eglwys on 16th. One was near Camborne, Cornwall, on 20-21st. An Irish record came from Saltee Islands, Co Wexford, from 17-19th and the final bird of the month was at Porthgwarra, Cornwall, from 27th.

Sprinkling of seedeaters

A male European Serin at Hemsby, Norfolk, on 3rd was the first of a small trickle of records during April. Others followed in Dorset on 4th and 7th, with records in Kent, Norfolk, East Yorkshire and Scilly in the second week of the month. One was at Spurn, East Yorks, on 21st and a female at Landguard, Suffolk, on 23rd preceded three there on 26th. An early Common Rosefinch sang at Cromer, Norfolk, on 22nd. Following the disappearance of the wintering bird in Glamorgan on 7th, Little Buntings were found in East Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and Norfolk.

After last month's Surf Scoter at Hoylake – a first for the Wirral – an amazing seven were seen there on 9th, with four still on 21st (though just one remained a few days later). Another highlight of the month was the discovery of a flock of four Ring-necked Ducks – including three males – at Standlake, Oxon, on 4th. At least three lingered until the end of April; this represented a rare multi-occurrence in a landlocked English county, and with one pair even seen mating perhaps the species should be added to Schedule 1! A scattering of American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal and Lesser Scaup, as well as a few Black Brants, completed the rare wildfowl roll-call.

April is not renowned for producing rare seabirds, so a Wilson's Storm-petrel seen from RV *Celtic Explorer* some 70 miles west-south-west of Slyne Head, Co Galway, on 21st was as unexpected as it was impressive.

As many as nine Night Herons arrived on Scilly after the first report from St Mary's on 2nd – single counts never exceeded three (other than a report of six on 21st), but there was obvious individual variation, with both adults and first-summers seen. Birds were recorded around the archipelago for the rest of the month, with further records coming from Bryher, Tresco and St Agnes. Away from Scilly an adult obliged at Attenborough,

SÉAMUS FEENEY

This Western Subalpine Warbler at Brownstown Head, Co Waterford, lingered for just over a week from 11-17 April.

ROBIN MAWER

A now-typically poor showing of Bluethroats this spring included this bird in the nets on St Mary's, Scilly, on 25th.

Notts, on 26-27th and two flew over Kinsley, West Yorks, on 23rd; others were seen in Cornwall and Dorset.

Purple Herons were scarce, with a lingering bird at Drift Res, Cornwall, one of just three (the others were in Northumberland and Co Wicklow). A White Stork photographed at Solva, Pembs, on 22nd followed a bird seen at two sites in Gloucestershire on 21st. Glossy Ibises stayed put in Nottinghamshire and Cambridgeshire, as did two Cattle Egrets in Kent.

The now-regular concentration of White-billed Divers was noted off the north Aberdeenshire coastline during April, with the highest numbers consistently noted from boat trips. The highest count was of 12 on 6th, while 10 were seen on 18th with eight still there on 22nd, by which time most were in glorious summer plumage. Elsewhere, the long-staying bird remained off South Ronaldsay, Orkney, and three were off the north-east coast of Lewis, Outer Hebrides, on 16th. Others were off the Lothian coastline from 18-21st, as well as off Highland and Cornwall.

A strong passage of Ospreys occurred early in the month, with a noticeable spike in reports during fine weather on 6-7th. Rough-legged Buzzards remained prominent throughout April and a number of migrant birds were seen, with Yorkshire faring particularly well. The first Montagu's Harrier of the spring was in Warwickshire on 16th, while there was a steady trickle of Black Kite records from the second week onwards.

Swiftly does it

A report of a White-tailed Eagle at Thornham Point, Norfolk, raised eyebrows on 18th but was followed by an adult over Hickling Broad and Horsey, Norfolk, and later Boyton, Suffolk, on 21st. The same bird was then over Thurne on 23rd before being tracked along the Norfolk coast between Salthouse and Holme on 25th; it then crossed The Wash and was last seen at Gibraltar Point, Lincs.

The first White-rumped Sandpiper of the spring turned up on Papa Westray, Orkney, on 25th, lingering for a few days.

Kentish Plover seems to be ever rarer in Britain, and there were just two brief records in April: at Cley, Norfolk, on 25th and Pegwell Bay, Kent, on 26th. A number of Dotterel trips appeared at traditional locations as the month progressed – not least Pendle Hill, Lancs, which welcomed up to four birds from 19th. Following the year's first on St Martin's, Scilly, on 8th the fields around Choseley, Norfolk, produced up to nine from 13th. Small groups were in the likes of Carmarthen, Ceredigion, West Yorkshire and Dumfries and Galloway; an impressive eight were seen near Slyne Head, Co Galway, on 28th following the discovery of four a few days previously.

There was a fair passage of Little Gulls in the fourth week of the month, with peak counts on 23rd including 44 at King George V Res, Gtr London, and 41 at Grafham Water, Cambs. Nottinghamshire's first Ring-billed Gull for 19 years was at Attenborough NR on 12th, while another notable inland record concerned a first-summer at Daventry, Northants, on 22-23rd. After a scattering of records early in the month, only an immature on the Hayle Estuary, Cornwall, remained at the month's end.

Smaller numbers of Black and Little Terns were also on the move, though Arctic Tern passage hadn't really got going by the end of the month. An early White-winged Black Tern was a nice surprise at Broom GP, Beds, on 24th.

Among the commoner migrants, Ring Ouzel reports rose exponentially throughout the first week of April, with the month's passage one of the best seen in many years. An intense movement through many traditional haunts in the southern half of the country began in the second week, particularly on the downs of the Home Counties. The numbers involved were difficult to quantify, but many hundreds – perhaps thousands – were seen. Among these were some impressive single-site counts: one can only imagine what the minimum of 52 together on the same slope at Combe Hill, Berks, must have looked like on the evening of 13th. This eclipsed an impressive 41 at Ivinghoe Beacon, Bucks, on 10th and 32 at Roydon Common, Norfolk, on 18th. ■

JAMES LOWEN

Above: the stubble fields around Choseley Barns, Norfolk, are a regular stop-over site for returning 'trips' of Dotterel, and included this fresh female bird on 9th; males are the duller sex in this species.

BILL BASTON (WWW.BILLBASTON.COM)

Left: a Lapland Bunting in summer plumage is quite the rarity in Britain, and so this male bird at Weybourne, Norfolk, attracted attention on 7th.

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Western Palearctic: April 2015

German birders were delighted when last year's Black-browed Albatross (right, with Northern Gannet) returned to the island of Heligoland on 21st.

JOCHEN DIERSCHKE

A month of firsts

Josh Jones reports on a spring which has been producing an impressive number of national firsts in the region.

Migration continued apace across the region, with national firsts noted in an impressive number of countries. Kuwait's first Plain Leaf Warbler was discovered at Al Mutla'a on 15th and was still there on 18th. Another potential first for the country came in the form of a Masked Booby reported at Jahra Pools reserve on 1st, while the country's fourth Black Bush Robin arrived at Al-Dhahar on 27th.

Israel, on the other hand, was fairly quiet, with little more to report than the Grey Hypocolius still at Ashkelon until mid-month and at least a couple of Oriental Honey Buzzards passing through Eilat.

A Cream-coloured Courser was a great find at Capo Murro di Porco, Sicily, on 20th, with Italy's first Striated Heron – if accepted as wild – photographed in the north at Sestri Levante, Liguria, the same day.

A busy month in Spain saw the nation's first Stilt Sandpiper touch down in fields near Pals, Girona, for one day only on 18th, with a Greater Yellowlegs at Alcollarín, Cáceres, the following day. To complete the showing of Nearctic waders, a Killdeer was at Aldover, Catalonia, on 7th. The wintering Thayer's Gull was last noted in Galicia on 12th and Catalonia's Brown Shrike had also left by the second week of the month; its Pygmy Cormorant, however, stuck around for much of April.

Neighbouring Portugal boasted a near-adult Kelp Gull at Costa da Caparica, Lisbon, from 27th. This follows hot on the heels of two birds in 2013 and hints that the species should be on the radar of gull-watchers in western Europe.

France had a fairly quiet month, though the nation's first Bimaculated Lark was photographed at Hyères salt

AURÉLIEN AUDEVARD

This Bimaculated Lark at Hyères salt pans, Var, just before dusk on 11th was the first for France. Found by its photographer, the bird was not present the following day.

TOMASZ CHODKIEWICZ

Poland's first-ever White-crowned Wheatear pitched up in a back garden in Winduga on 12 May, after the Polish Society for the Protection of Birds was contacted by the householders regarding a "strange bird" they'd seen.

MIGUEL BERKEMEIER

A Kelp Gull at Lisbon, Portugal, this April was well north of its usual south-west African range, and raised the spectre of the possibility of an eventual British record for many speculative birders.

VINCENT LEGRAND

A juvenile Thayer's Gull (top, with Herring Gull) was a long-awaited national first for the The Netherlands at Bergen aan Zee, Noord-Holland, on 11th, and remained in the area until 27th.

pans, Var, late evening on 11th.

The Dark-eyed Junco was last seen in Groningen, The Netherlands, on 5th, but its departure was soon followed by the arrival of the country's first spring record of Red-flanked Bluetail at Noordwijk, Zuid-Holland, on 10th. This was subsequently eclipsed by the discovery of what looks like as bona fide a juvenile Thayer's Gull as you're likely to see in the north of the country, at Egmond aan Zee, on 11th. It was relocated at nearby Bergan aan Zee on 14th and lingered until 27th.

Germany also enjoyed a Red-flanked Bluetail early in the month, at Spikeroog, Niedersachsen, on 9th. Following rumours of a sighting at sea to the west of the island, exciting news came on 21st when last year's Black-browed Albatross returned to Heligoland. Present until the evening of 23rd, it then flew back out to sea and did not return by the end of the month – this pattern very much echoing its fleeting appearances in late spring 2014.

Two Black-winged Kite records came from Denmark in two days from 23rd, while in Sweden a particularly smart Black-throated Accentor was present in gardens in Hamstad, Halland, for four days until 18th (though news was suppressed). A Demoiselle Crane was among its Common cousins at Tyrnävä, Oulu, Finland, on 25-26th.

Iceland's fourth Red-breasted Goose arrived with Greylags at Flói reserve, Árborg, on 12th and is presumably the bird which wintered in Orkney, Scotland. Similarly, the Ross's Goose at Vík, Southwest, on 14th is considered to be that which spent much of the winter in the Scottish Borders and Northumberland.

The month closed with a Moussier's Redstart in the Ebro Delta, Spain, and a Streaked Shearwater off the Red Sea coast of Egypt at Safaga. ■

BIRDGUIDES

EDGAR SCHONART

ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

Though a fairly regular vagrant to the eastern Mediterranean, this Demoiselle Crane at the spring migration hot-spot of Lesvos, Greece, was the first sighting for the island and the fifth national record.

Inset: a female Red-flanked Bluetail was a welcome surprise on the lesser-known migration watchpoint island of Spiekeroog, Germany.

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1 Shapwick Heath and Ham Wall, Somerset. *Pages 25-27*
2 Boyton Marshes and beyond, Suffolk. *Page 29*
3 Bempton Cliffs RSPB, East Yorkshire. *Page 30*
4 Cors Caron NNR, Mid Wales. *Page 31*
5 The Isle of Rum, Inner Hebrides. *Page 32*

MORE JUNE SITES

- Ardnamurchan, Highland: **bit.ly/bw252Ardnamurchan**
- The Blorenge, Monmouthshire: **bit.ly/bw228Blorenge**
- The Brecks, Norfolk: **bit.ly/bw240TheBrecks**
- Brecon Beacons NP, South Wales: **bit.ly/bw240BreconBeacons**
- Cairngorms NP, Highland: **bit.ly/bw240Cairngorms**
- Gwenffrwd-Dinas RSPB, Carmarthenshire: **bit.ly/bw252GwenffrwdDinas**
- Southern Isle of Man: **bit.ly/bw228IsleMan**
- Thursley Common, Surrey: **bit.ly/bw228ThursleyCommon**
- The Farne Islands, Northumberland: **bit.ly/bw240TheFarnes**
- Walberswick, Suffolk: **bit.ly/bw252Walberswick**

www.birdwatch.co.uk BONUS ONLINE CONTENT

1 SITE OF THE MONTH

SHAPWICK HEATH AND HAM WALL

Well known among birders as a hot-spot for rare and scarce herons, this productive area of the Somerset Levels should produce a variety of large waders, as well as passerines and wildfowl, says *Julian Thomas*.

The area is excellent for breeding herons, with the Avalon Marshes holding the largest population of nesting Bitterns in the country.

STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

Shapwick Heath NNR and Ham Wall RSPB are the two flagship reserves of the Somerset Levels, part of the multi-agency landscape-scale conservation project known as the Avalon Marshes. Together the two sites cover more than 600 ha, comprising a mosaic of extensive reedbeds, open water, carr and damp woodland, mainly willow, birch and alder, with some oaks. The area was recently described by a visiting birder as "the best inland birding in the country".

Water bird bonanza

Both sites harbour a wide variety of wetland species, including **Marsh Harrier**, **Bearded Tit** and plentiful **Reed**, **Sedge** and **Cetti's Warblers**; Savi's Warbler has also been recorded on a number of occasions. But it is for rare and scarce herons that the sites have rightly become famous in recent years (see pages 34-38).

The Avalon Marshes now hold the largest population of breeding **Bitterns** in the country, and there are

USEFUL CONTACTS

Travel information and timetables

- **Traveline:** 0871 200 2233 or www.traveline.info.
- **Traveline Scotland:** 0871 200 2233 or www.travelinescotland.com.
- **Traveline Cymru:** 0871 200 2233 or www.traveline-cymru.info
- **Stagecoach Bus:** www.stagecoachbus.com.
- **Arriva Bus:** 0844 800 4411 or www.arrivabus.co.uk.
- **National Rail:** 0845 748 4950 or www.nationalrail.com.
- **Sustrans:** 0117 926 8893 or www.sustrans.org.uk.

National bird news

BirdGuides.com: for all bird news and to report your own sightings, call 0333 577 2473, email sightings@birdguides.com or visit www.birdguides.com.

Mapping

Access fully interactive and annotated Google maps for all itineraries at **bit.ly/BWMaps**.

Further information

- **County bird recorders:** www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/bird-recording/county-bird-recorders.
- **Birdwatch Bookshop:** for discounted birding books see www.birdwatch.co.uk/store.

Aim to be at Ham Wall RSPB at dusk for the possibility of Barn Owl.

KEITH PRESCOTT

at least 12 **Great Egrets** present year-round at their only British breeding site; birds may be seen anywhere in the area. It's also the sole regular British site for **Little Bitterns**, which have over-summered at Ham Wall for the last six years, and probably bred in four of those. The RSPB is generally coy about publicising their presence and the birds can be very elusive, but you may be lucky. Purple, Night and Squacco Herons have also been recorded more than once in recent years, as have Spoonbill and Glossy Ibis and even Red-footed Falcon, this last species joining the numerous **Hobbies**.

RICHARD TOLLER (WWW.FLICKR.COM)

The lagoon 300 m west of the Natural England car park, in the area known as Meare Heath, is drained each spring to provide feeding habitat for a wide variety of passage waders. It is also one of several places on the reserves to see **Garganey**, and one of the better spots for Otter, too.

This 'scrape' has previously produced rarities such as Lesser Yellowlegs, several Pectoral Sandpipers and two Temminck's Stints, but then in April this year the big one finally happened – Britain's third Hudsonian Godwit (see pages 8-9)! Scarce migrant species such as **Wood** and **Green Sandpipers**, **Ruff**, **Spotted Redshank**, **Little Stint** and **Little Ringed Plover** are all at least annual, and later in the summer there is a chance of good views of **Water Rail**, or even **Spotted Crake**.

Noah's Lake is a haven for wildfowl in winter, but also has a good track record for spring and summer rarities, particularly terns, with **Whiskered**, **White-winged Black** and **Gull-billed** all having been recorded; **Black Tern** and **Little Gull** are annual, as are passage **Ospreys**.

On the heath

Start the day at Shapwick Heath. From Glastonbury take the B3151 to Wedmore. At the village of Meare go past the church on the right and the garage on your left, then take the next left into Ashcott Road. Just past the Railway Inn is a small Natural England car park on the right.

Park in the car park 1 and walk west, checking the scrub and trees in the first section for **Garden Warbler** and **Common Whitethroat** among the many **Blackcaps**. The first lagoon on Meare Heath, across the main drain, is a good spot for Bittern, which in June should be feeding young and at its most obvious.

Head to the scrape 2, with its handy benches for those who want a breather. Behind these is the reedbed known as '70 Acre'; this is one of the best spots for **Bearded Tits**, though seeing them can be a challenge.

At the crossroads further along, either turn left down a peaty drove to the raised Noah's Hide 3, overlooking Noah's Lake, or right across the bridge to Meare Heath Hide. Both provide opportunities to see butterflies and dragonflies as well as common

The reedbeds at Shapwick Heath are home to Bearded Tit. The species can be difficult to see, so listen out for the distinctive 'pinging' call.

HAN BOUWMEESTER (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

Bearded Tits breed at Shapwick Heath, although the birds are often easier to hear than see.

woodland birds. Alternatively, for a longer walk, continue on along the main track, which gives a different view over Noah's Lake and leads to the western end of the reserve.

Little chance

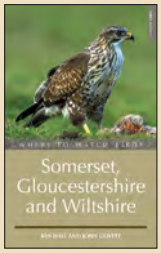
Return to the car park and cross the road to access Ham Wall RSPB. The ivy-covered trees by the car park and the feeders at the cottage 4 are worth a quick check, but the main interest is in the reedbeds. Little Bitterns, if present, are most likely on the south side of the track in the area known as Walton Heath 5, which is overlooked by several small hides and blinds opposite the first viewing platform and Loxton's Marsh further on.

The viewing platforms provide good vistas over productive areas. In summer the first is better for herons, Marsh Harrier and passing terns, and for **Barn Owls** in the evenings. The second platform, approximately as far on again as the first is from the car park, is good for wildfowl. **Great Crested Grebe**, **Northern Shoveler** and **Common Pochard** are all likely, as well as Garganey. Rarer species have included Pied-billed Grebe and Green-winged and Blue-winged Teal, as well as waders.

Again it is possible to walk on further if you wish. The pools and woodland areas to the east may harbour birds not seen by others who have already turned back, and there is a tea garden at the Sharpham end where you can refresh yourself before the walk back.

VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Where to Watch Birds in Somerset, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire by Ken Hall and John Govett (third edition, Christopher Helm, £16.99) – order from £15.29 on page 77.

Sites and access

Both sites are open at all times and there is free public access. The Natural England car park is open at all times; a much larger RSPB one is open 7 am-9 pm, June to September. The nearest train station is 10 miles away in Bridgwater. A bus service runs to nearby Ashcott and Meare villages. See **www.travelinesw.com** for details. The reserves are on Sustrans National Cycle Route 3. Access is along wide, mostly flat gravel tracks; both sites are gated, but wheelchair access is possible using a RADAR key; there is access to disabled parking by the first viewing platform at Ham Wall.

Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 141 and Landranger 18.

Web resources

- **www.somersetbirds.net** for the Somerset Ornithological Society with local sightings.
- **bit.ly/bw276ShapwickHeathNNR** for Shapwick Heath NNR.
- **wwww.rspb.org.uk/hamwall** for Ham Wall RSPB.
- Follow on Twitter: **@somersetbirds** and **@RSPBSomerset**.

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See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to the fully annotated Google maps.

Where to watch birds

2 BOYTON MARSHES AND BEYOND

By Nick Mason

Where and why

These Suffolk reserves comprise a good mix of habitats, providing a variety of bird species. The Suffolk Wildlife Trust reserve of Sutton and Hollesley Commons represents one of the largest areas of Sandlings heath left in Britain. This lowland, heather-dominated heathland is a rare habitat throughout Europe. Hollesley Marshes and Boyton Marshes are managed by the RSPB. These coastal grazing marshes are important for a variety of breeding waders. Shingle Street provides a mix of bush, scrub and grasslands.

Listen out for the distinctive churring of European Nightjar at Sutton and Hollesley Commons.

BILL BASTON (WWW.BILLBASTON.COM)

Route planner

Start your day at Boyton Marshes. The reserve is accessible from the A12. Take the A1152 through Woodbridge and then follow the B1084 to Butley. Turn right and follow the road through to Capel St Andrew. Turn left and follow the road towards Boyton village. Approximately 400 m before the village, bear left down a concrete track. Park at TM 387475 (1).

On the river wall there is a chance of spring migrants and breeding grazing marsh birds. On a warm day, raptors rise over the woods opposite. **Barn Owls** are often seen and **Ravens** have been in the vicinity for two years.

You can walk the 1.5 miles along the river wall to Hollesley Marshes (2). Alternatively return to Woodbridge and take the B1083; turn left onto Heath Road and go straight across the crossroads onto Rectory Road, then turn left onto Woodbridge Walk. Park in the new car park (TM 370448).

The new scrape has been a great success and seems to be again this year. The best spot to scan the scrape is by the pillbox (TM 378447). Upward of 40 pairs of **Avocet** are on nests, with several **Northern Lapwing**, **Common Redshank** and **Ringed Plover**. **Marsh Harrier** is seen daily and **Peregrine Falcons** are regular. **Cetti's** and other warblers breed around the reserve and **Water Rail** is often heard.

Hollesley Scrape will attract a real rarity before long, with **Little** and **Temminck's Stints**, **Wood** and **Green Sandpipers**, **Greenshank**, **Little Ringed Plover** and other waders having been seen already. The local area, including the reserve, still has reasonable numbers of **European Turtle Dove**. Wall Browns are found on the track.

Return to Rectory Road, this time turning left into Shingle Street, and park at TM 366427 (3). The bushes, scrub and grasslands are all worth checking. Well known for **Short-eared Owl**, as well as passage birds in spring and autumn, Shingle Street can produce migrants at any time. Red-breasted Flycatcher, Bluethroat, Lesser Grey Shrike, Whinchat and Firecrest have all been recorded in June. **Corn Buntings** and **Yellow Wagtails** breed in the fields nearby.

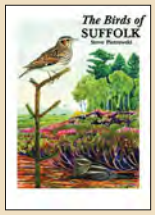
End your day at Sutton and Hollesley Commons (4). The reserve is on Heath Road. Head to the round pillbox structure at TM 333474. The areas of heath here hold good numbers of **Dartford Warbler** and **Woodlark**, as well as **Yellowhammer** and **Linnet** and a recovering population of **European Stonechats**. **Tree Pipits** appear to have been lost from the Suffolk coast, but spring individuals are recorded here.

There is usually a locally breeding **Hobby**. The **Common Redstart** population on Upper Hollesley is quite healthy. Be aware, however, that by June many of the birds will have stopped singing. The tracks are worth checking for Silver-studded Blue and other heathland insects.

There are some old oak posts (TM 338476) that form a good spot for **European Nightjar**. When listening for the nightjars, keep an ear out for **Long-eared Owl** which has bred here.

VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



The Birds of Suffolk by Steve Piotrowski (first edition, Christopher Helm, £40) – order from £38 on page 77.

Sites and access

All sites are open at all times and entry is free, although car parking charges may apply. The nearest train stations are at Woodbridge and Melton. For local buses, visit the county council website at **www.suffolkonboard.com/buses**. There is wheelchair access at Sutton and Hollesley Commons; paths at the RSPB reserves are grassy, uneven and can be muddy.

Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 212 and Landranger 169.

Web resources

- **www.rspb.org.uk/boytonmarshes** for information on Boyton Marshes and Hollesley Marshes.
- **www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/reserves/sutton-hollesley-commons** for Sutton and Hollesley Commons
- Follow on Twitter: **@RSPBintheEast** and **@suffolkwildlife**.

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See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

3 BEMPTON CLIFFS RSPB

By Mark James Pearson

Where and why

Recently relaunched to much-deserved acclaim, Bempton Cliffs RSPB boasts that rare combination of easy accessibility and an internationally renowned wildlife experience. An unforgettable assault on the senses, Bempton has to be seen and heard (and smelled!) to be believed – it's the archetypal seabird city, with every last available ledge occupied by one or more iconic species.

Bempton Cliffs is an excellent site to see Puffins up close, along with good numbers of other breeding seabirds.

MARK JAMES PEARSON

Route planner

Bempton Cliffs 1 is on the cliff road from Bempton, which is on the B1229 Flamborough to Filey road. The rugged limestone cliffs rise some 120 m from the North Sea, with purpose-built cliff-top viewing platforms giving unrivalled views of the stars of the show, as well as the beautiful Yorkshire coastline.

One of the best things about the reserve is that there's no need to plan a route – all the viewpoints offer different perspectives on the flagship species, with the nearest just a couple of minutes from the visitor centre, and the furthest – Jubilee Corner to the west and Staple Newk to the east – only about 15 minutes in either direction. If you wander between them and take your time, you're guaranteed contrasting experiences at each. If there's something in particular you'd like to see, ask the staff in the centre and they'll provide up-to-the-minute directions.

June is the perfect time to visit, with all the main players in the thick of their breeding cycle. Of the quarter of a million seabirds present, top of the list for many has to be the **Northern Gannets**, numbers of which have rocketed from just a handful a few decades ago to more than 11,000 pairs presently. Look out for the numerous mini-dramas unfolding within the colony, which can easily occupy the lion's share of your visit.

Three breeding auk species can be seen at superbly close range from the viewpoints. Rows of squabbling **Common Guillemots** and **Razorbills** dominate, with **Puffins** most often found where suitable crevices occur. **Kittiwakes** are arguably a much underrated attraction, with the thousands of pairs providing eerie onomatopoeic serenades and sudden 'snowstorms' as they leave the cliffs en masse. **Northern Fulmars** allow close scrutiny both on the nest and in the air. The whole experience is a photographer's dream, with all the key species not only *in situ* but also close up in flight, often at eye level.

While the majority of visitors come for the seabirds, Bempton is also a magnet for migrants, with a long list of mouth-watering scarcities and rarities to its name. With this in mind, if conditions are favourable it's worth checking the bushes carefully: early June could easily produce a classic late spring arrival – perhaps **Marsh Warbler** or **Red-backed Shrike** – and it's a peak time for an outlandish mega. Good spots include the areas of scrub around the centre and the small 'bowl' of scrub by the car park, known as the Dell.

Breeding landbirds across the reserve include ubiquitous **Tree Sparrows**, **Yellowhammers**, **Corn Buntings** (often best located via their 'bunch-of-keys' song) and **Skylarks**. **Kestrel** and **Barn Owl** favour the rough grassland, while **Peregrine Falcon** can potentially be seen anywhere overhead or along the cliff-tops.

Be sure also to keep an eye on the open sea, where summer cetacean sightings are increasingly common. Harbour Porpoises are regular and Minke Whales, Bottlenose Dolphins and White-beaked Dolphins have all visited recently.

VISITOR INFORMATION

READS

Where to Watch Birds in Yorkshire by John Mather (third edition, Christopher Helm, £18.99) – order from £16.99 on page 77

Sites and access

The reserve is open at all times throughout the year. Entry for adults is £3.50 or free to RSPB members. The new centre is open daily from 9.30 am-5 pm in summer. The nearest train station is 1.5 miles away in Bempton and buses stop 1 mile away at the White Horse pub. Contact East Yorkshire Motor Services for details (tel: 01482 592929, or visit **www.eyms.co.uk**). Part of the reserve is wheelchair friendly and there are disabled toilets, but contact staff regarding the state of paths before leaving.

Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 301 and Landranger 101.

Web resources

- **www.rspb.org.uk/bemptoncliffs** for all site information.
- Follow on Twitter: **@bempton_cliffs**.

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See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

Where to watch birds

4 CORS CARON NNR

By Andy Polkey

Where and why

Cors Caron NNR, also known as Tregaron Bog, is a large wetland in Mid Wales. A mixture of raised bog, willow carr and the River Teifi floodplain, it contains a wide range of wildlife. More than 170 bird species have been recorded, with 70 species breeding on the reserve. It is an important site for wintering and breeding waterfowl.

Route planner

Cors Caron is half an hour from Aberystwyth. The main car park is signed on the west side of the B4343 road between Tregaron and Pontrhydfendigaid, on the left travelling from Tregaron.

For bird song and songbirds, as well as waders, morning visits are best and also increase the chances of seeing an Otter. For raptors, later in the day is better, with warm days being especially good.

From the car park 1, walk southwards along the Railway Walk towards the main boardwalk. Check for scrub and woodland species here. **Pied Flycatcher** and **Wood Warbler** may be heard in nearby valley-side woodland. **Red Kite**, **Common Buzzard** and **Raven** are often visible overhead, and look out for feeding **Hobbies** at their only regular west Wales location. **Barn** and **Tawny Owls** and **Lesser Redpoll** breed in drier areas.

Walk out through the oak arch along the boardwalk. As the landscape opens up and changes to wetland habitats, **Sedge Warbler** and **Reed Bunting** dominate. **Grasshopper Warblers** are present in good numbers, but are more frequently heard in dull weather or early or late in the day, as are drumming **Common Snipe**. **Northern Lapwing** breeds here, while **Eurasian Curlew** and **Common Redshank** are more likely to be heard than seen as they breed away from visitor access routes.

Check isolated trees and shrubs for **Whinchat**, **European Stonechat** and **Tree Pipit**, as well as the possibility of a perched Hobby or **Common Cuckoo**. Overhead, Hobbies may be feeding on dragonflies or hirundines. Large flocks of **Common Swifts**, **Swallows** and **House** and **Sand Martins** can sometimes be seen feeding over the pools and wet ground.

Ponds near to the boardwalk may contain breeding **Common Teal** and feeding waders such as Common Redshank and Common Snipe. Water Rail is possible.

From the Observation Building, 2 look over the centre of the reserve and you may get views of ducks or waders on the lagoon or of raptors overhead. Rejoin the Railway Walk through the willow archway 3 and return to the car park. Both **Marsh** and **Willow Tits** breed in the willow carr.

Walk northwards from the car park to Maesllyn Lake 4, on which there are normally Tufted Duck year round and a range of other waterbirds depending on the season.

Continuing northwards, a longer walk can be had along the Railway Walk, with opportunities to look over the open extent of the reserve and overhead for more raptor species. There is a small hide 5 1.5 miles north of the main car park. Scrub along the old railway line cycle trail has breeding **Common Redstart**, **Bullfinch** and warblers.

The 4.5-mile circular Riverside Walk goes out to the river Teifi on another boardwalk and returns to the main boardwalk along the river bank, giving more opportunities to see and hear wetland birds in the centre of the reserve. Scarcer species are occasionally reported and have included Bittern, Green-winged Teal, Lesser Yellowlegs, Marsh Harrier, Osprey, Bluethroat and Great Grey Shrike.

Red Kite is possible overhead anywhere on the reserve.

OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

VISITOR INFORMATION

READS

- ***Where to Watch Birds in Britain*** by Simon Harrap and Nigel Redman (second edition, Christopher Helm, £19.99) – order for £18.99 on page 77.
- ***Birds in Wales*** by Roger Lovegrove, Graham Williams and Iolo Williams (Poyser, £50) – order from £40.99 on page 77.

Sites and access

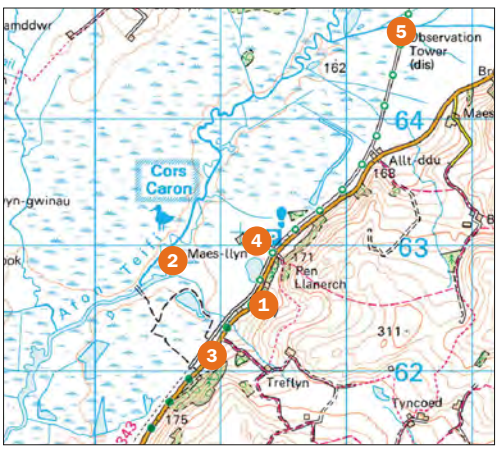
Cors Caron is open all the time and entry and parking are free. The nearest train station is several miles away in Aberystwyth. The 585 and 588 buses between Aberystwyth and Lampeter stop in Tregaron, while two infrequent local buses pass Cors Caron NNR – the T21 and T29. The reserve is on the Sustrans Ystwyth Trail. There is good wheelchair access at the reserve, but the riverbank section of the Riverside Walk is not always passable; it can be muddy and requires good footwear.

Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 199 and Landranger 146.

Web resources

- **bit.ly/bw276CorsCaronNNR** for more information about the reserve.
- **www.ceredigionbirds33.blogspot.co.uk** for a Ceredigion bird blog with local sightings.
- Follow on Twitter: **@walesbirds**.



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Where to watch birds

5 THE ISLE OF RUM

By Mike Ingram and Sean Morris

Where and why

Rum NNR is managed by Scottish Natural Heritage and is situated approximately 15 miles west of Mallaig in north-west Scotland; it is the largest of the Small Isles. It covers an area of 10,684 ha of mountain, moorland and steep cliffs, with spectacular views across to the mainland, Eigg, Canna, Skye, Mull and the distant Outer Hebrides. It holds a range of internationally important habitats, including blanket bog, fens, species-rich grassland and numerous lochans. More than 70 per cent of the island is designated as either a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) or Special Protection Area (SPA) for its seabird assemblages, Red-throated Diver and Manx Shearwater.

Route planner

The island is accessed via the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry which runs a regular service to the Small Isles from Mallaig, which has good road and rail access from Fort William. Charter boats are available from Mallaig and from May to September the *Sheerwater* wildlife cruise boat operates from Arisaig. Once on the island there are a number of routes you can take depending on your length of stay.

The ferry journey to Rum is a good starting point for birding, with **Kittiwake**, **Northern Gannet**, **Common Guillemot**, **Razorbill**, **Puffin** and **Great Skua** likely to be seen on the crossing. **Great Northern Diver**, while more common in winter, can be seen in most months of the year.

Rum is internationally important for its **Manx Shearwater** population, with more than 100,000 pairs breeding high up on the Rum Cuillin mountain range, and they will also be a common sight over the sea. There is also a good chance of seeing Minke Whale, Harbour Porpoise, Bottlenose Dolphin and Basking Shark.

From the pier, follow the track through woodland along Loch Scresort to Kinloch village. Look out for **Red-throated Diver**, **Common Eider**, **Black Guillemot** and **Red-breasted Merganser** – all of which breed on Rum – in the sea loch 1. The mature woodlands 2 around Kinloch are home to **Willow Warbler**, **Blackcap**, **Common Chiffchaff** and **Treecreeper**, with good numbers of breeding **Song Thrush**; there is also a small heronry. An evening stroll through this area should reveal roding **Woodcock**.

From Kinloch take the track out towards Harris (a 16-mile round trip from Kinloch) and Kilmory (a 10-mile round trip from Kinloch) and onto the National Nature Reserve 3, which gradually opens out from woodland onto open moorland. **European Stonechat**, **Common Cuckoo** and **Grasshopper Warbler** can often be seen and heard at this time of year along the first stretch of path.

Once through the gate and surrounded by moorland, there is a good chance of seeing **Golden Eagle** and possibly **Hen Harrier**, **Merlin**, **Raven** and **Dipper**. Keep following the track until you reach a fork which will either take you to Harris or Kilmory.

Northern Wheatear, **Rock Pipit**, **Eurasian Curlew** and **Common Snipe** can be seen at Harris 4. Red-throated Divers are often present in the bay. Kilmory 5 has dunes, machair and sandy beaches, and **Ringed Plover**, **Oystercatcher**, Eurasian Curlew and **Arctic** and **Common Terns** breed around here. **White-tailed Eagles** nest on Rum and can be seen anywhere on the island, including Harris and Kilmory. **Twite** are frequently seen at both sites, too.

For the more adventurous, the Rum Cuillin 6 and Western Hills 7 can offer good views of **Red Grouse**, **European Golden Plover**, Merlin and Golden Eagle. Look out for the many burrows of Manx Shearwater on a traverse of the Rum Cuillin.

Rum holds more than 100,000 breeding pairs of Manx Shearwaters, representing 40 per cent of the British population.

STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

VISITOR INFORMATION

READS

Where to Watch Birds in Britain by Simon Harrap and Nigel Redman (second edition, Christopher Helm, £19.99) – order for £18.99 on page 77.

Sites and access

Rum is accessible at all times of year and there is open access to most of the island. There are two main tracks of good condition and suitable for cycling from Kinloch to Harris in the west and Kilmory at the north of the island. There are a number of old pony tracks which give access to other parts of the island, but these are over difficult terrain with often poor surface and drainage. There is a small visitor centre and shop on Rum. There is no public vehicle access on the island.

Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 397 and Landranger 39.

Web resources

- **www.nnr-scotland.org.uk/rum** for more information about the NNR.
- **www.isleofrum.com** for general information about the island.
- **www.arisaig.co.uk** for information on getting to Rum.
- **www.calmac.co.uk** for the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry.
- Follow on Twitter: **@isleofrum** and **@SNH_Tweets**.

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See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

Where to watch birds

JUNE'S TARGET BIRD

Spoonbill

JAMES HANLON

LISA GEOGHEGAN

For the first time in more than 300 years, Spoonbill is a fully established part of Norfolk's avifauna (main photo), while juvenile birds (right) are becoming a more regular sight as the species spreads to new sites.

This wetland speciality is becoming easier to see after a breeding colony was recently established in East Anglia. Numbers of wintering individuals are also increasing.

Lost as a British breeding bird in the 1600s, the species made several attempts to recolonise, but it wasn't until 1999 that a pair successfully bred, on the Ribble Estuary in Lancashire. An attempt in 2000 at Mersehead RSPB, Dumfries and Galloway, failed, while in 2002 10 nests were built in Suffolk, in 2004 an attempt was made in Cumbria and then in 2008 a pair raised three young at Kirkcudbright Bay, Dumfries and Galloway. This was followed by the establishment of a colony at Holkham, Norfolk, where six pairs fledged 10 young in 2010. Eight pairs then bred in 2011 and 10 in 2012. A nesting attempt was also made in Cornwall in 2012 (see pages 34-38).

Away from breeding sites, there are an estimated 75 records each year, but these have been increasing. There are now about 40 adult and immature birds which summer along the north Norfolk coast. Wintering numbers have also been going up, with a record flock of 47 seen at Poole Harbour, Dorset, a regular wintering site, in October 2014. There are occasional influxes, such as the minimum of 18 seen in Northumberland in summer 2011.

In recent years many ringed individuals have been noted, and some movements have been followed over several years, with one individual being logged in Germany, Spain, Morocco, Wales and England. Several birds have originated from colonies in The Netherlands, the closest breeding birds on the Continent.

How to see

Apart from visiting the Holkham breeding colony or other north Norfolk wetlands, or heading to the main wintering area in Dorset, most sightings are by chance. Despite being large and white, a Spoonbill can easily hide behind reeds or other vegetation, and can also be remarkably inactive – patience may be needed in many cases. Always check on **www.birdguides.com** for the latest sightings, as some individuals will stay for extended periods. ■

FIND YOUR OWN

Check any coastal wetland on the east, south-east and south coasts, especially from north Norfolk southwards. The established breeding colony at Holkham offers the best summer opportunities. The sites below are the most reliable in recent years.

England

- **Norfolk:** Holkham Freshmarsh (TF 881452) and Titchwell Marsh RSPB (TF 750438)
- **Suffolk:** Minsmere RSPB (TM 471672)
- **Kent:** Cliffe Pools RSPB (TQ 722757) and Elmley NNR (TQ 937678)
- **Dorset:** Arne RSPB (SY 972878) and Brownsea Island (SZ 032877) in Poole Harbour
- **Devon:** Bowling Green Marsh RSPB (SX 954872)

Wales

- **Carmarthen:** National Wetlands Centre WWT (SS 531984)
- **Gwent:** Newport Wetlands (ST 334834)

Scotland

- **Aberdeenshire:** Loch of Strathbeg RSPB (NK 055577)

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New residents of the reeds

JIM GIBBS

David Callahan examines the history and causes of the recent colonisations and breeding records of large wading birds from the Mediterranean region.

This summer, a visit to one of our larger areas of wetland could almost appear as if you're in the Algarve or Camargue. Not only have the habitats been extended and improved by careful management, but large wading birds have also increased in both number and species, returning some of Britain's marshlands almost to the species-rich state they were in during the Middle Ages.

The first landmark for this phenomenon (though Common Crane recolonised earlier – see *Birdwatch* 273: 41-43) was in 1996, when a pair of **Little Egrets** – formerly a rarity in Britain – successfully raised three chicks on Brownsea Island, Dorset. Five pairs bred the following year, and the species has since rapidly colonised the southern half of the country, with breeding numbers topping 700 pairs in recent years, expanding into Ireland and reaching as far north as Cumbria.

But Little Egret was just the vanguard species of a wave that would pick up into the 21st century, until southern Britain harboured at least a pair or two of the majority of the large wading bird species found regularly in Europe. Despite none having been identified in the sub-fossil record, Little Egret featured heavily in medieval banquets and, while it is possible that the species was imported from the Continent, it is also likely that it bred in the fens and has been confused with Bittern skeletons in the archaeological record.

Perhaps the first sign of things to come was the sizeable **Cattle Egret** influx of autumn 2007, which resulted in up to three pairs staying to nest in Somerset in spring 2008, with two pairs being confirmed as fledging two young, and probably the third, too. A well-known colonising species on a global scale, Cattle Egret has yet to gain a true breeding toehold, though. Birds have been present on and off since in either Somerset or Kent, and further breeding has been suspected, but without confirmation owing to the difficulty

ROBERT CANIS

Little Egret first bred in Britain on Brownsea Island, Dorset, in 1996, having had rarity status only a few years earlier. The spread of large wading birds to Britain appears to have reached tipping point at the turn of this decade.

In a scene almost unimaginable just 20 years ago, Great Egrets and a Little Egret (second from left) forage at Shapwick Heath NNR, with both species having bred in the area in recent years.

ANDREW BLOOMFIELD (NATURAL ENGLAND)

One of the Spoonbills in the new colony at Holkham NNR, Norfolk, tends its chicks. This breeding gathering now appears to be a permanent fixture at the site, with birds remaining in the area year-round.

of observing individuals present within large Little Egret colonies. There is still a good chance that with a top-up, the species may strengthen its grip on British citizenship.

Spoonbill was widely anticipated as a prospective coloniser in the past owing to the increased numbers breeding just the other side of the Channel (particularly in The Netherlands), and from 2002 onwards the species began intermittently summering in numbers. In the same year, nine pairs built 10 nests in a temporary colony in Suffolk, though no young were fledged and it is believed the whole colony was disrupted by the activities of Foxes. Suffolk again held double figures in 2007, when 16 birds built a minimum of two nests and laid eggs, but once more none fledged.

The compass shifted in 2008, when three juveniles were seen at a site in Dumfries and Galloway on 23 August, after two adults were noted on 18th; somewhere Spoonbill had successfully nested surreptitiously and not been noticed until the chicks were out of the nest. Despite this optimistic start, there were no attempts in 2009, but in 2010 six pairs nested at Holkham NNR, Norfolk, fledging 10 young, and pairs have remained there each summer since.

Spoonbill's 21st century nesting is in fact a recolonisation, as the species bred in southern Britain until at least 1650.

Year of the herons

In fact, 2010 was a red letter year for rare breeding ardeids. Purple Heron bred for the first time ever, Great Egret was suspected of having done so, and Little Bittern continued its somewhat staggered start.

Occasional summering **Purple Herons** had been noted in Britain since the 1950s, but in 2007 Minsmere RSPB, Suffolk, ›

MARK CAUNT

> A prospective recolonisation of Night Heron may not be quite as outlandish as it first seems

ROGER AND LIZ CHARLWOOD (WORLDWILDLIFEIMAGES.COM)

held up to three birds throughout May, proudly showing breeding plumes and displaying. Heavy rain and flooding in early June precluded any actual breeding attempt, but in 2010 a pair finally succeeded further south at Dungeness RSPB, Kent, and produced two young, remaining until 23 August.

Great Egret had also been growing in occurrence over the previous decade or so, as breeding and passage birds began a northward expansion to northern France and the larger wetlands in the Low Countries. Birds were already summering in 2010, when a pair were seen repeatedly visiting the same patch of reeds in Somerset; another pair spent the entire summer at a heronry in Suffolk. Then, in 2012 the Somerset Levels were host to yet another successful breeding attempt when a pair of Great Egrets were seen exhibiting nesting behaviour at Shapwick Heath NNR on 7 April.

Little Bittern has more of a history in the British breeding avifauna over the last half century, as a pair had already bred in 1984 at Potteric Carr, South Yorkshire, when an adult male was witnessed feeding a fully grown chick with down still visible on its head. The species certainly bred in the 19th

Top: Bittern at Minsmere RSPB, Suffolk, 25 May 2014. The species has remained part of the British avifauna despite being in desperate straits in the mid-1990s. Along with the driver of climate change, the improvement of our best wetlands seems to have benefited most of our large waterbirds.

Left: while the expected Cattle Egret colonisation of southern Britain has remained unconsolidated after the species bred in Somerset in 2008, birds still linger most years; this individual was one of three which arrived at Dungeness RSPB, Kent, on 26 June 2014, two of which were still present at the time of writing.

WHICH SPECIES NEXT?

HOWARD BOTTRELL (WWW.ECOVISUALS.COM)

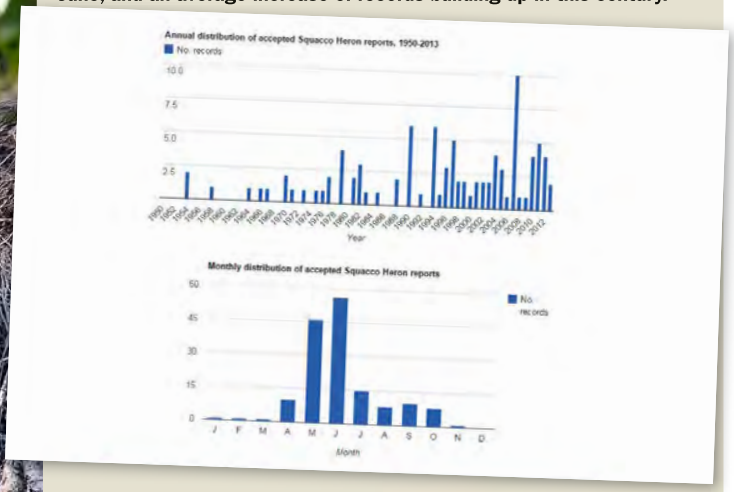
ASHLEY GROVE

Top left: Night Heron at Prawle village pond, Devon, in March 2007; the species breeds very close to the Channel coast on the Continent.

Top right: Glossy Ibises like these at Slimbridge WWT, Gloucestershire, in March 2007 are irrupting with increasing regularity from the Iberian peninsula, as drought repeatedly hits wetlands there.

Left and below: this Squacco Heron frequented Par, Cornwall, for a few days in May 2010. The BirdGuides.com statistics for the species hint at the possibility of colonisation, with peaks of occurrence in May and June, and an average increase of records building up in this century.

ANDREW CAREY



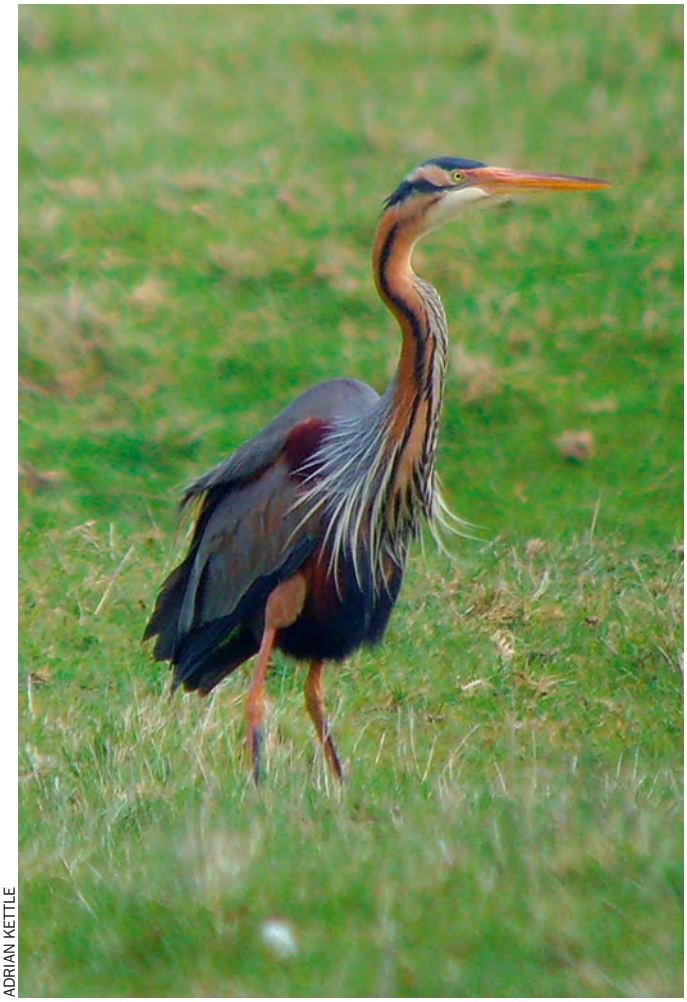
Night Heron A displaying pair was seen at Shapwick Heath, Somerset, in June 1997 and up to three were present until 25 August; it was suspected that one may have been juvenile, though this was never confirmed. That year, a group of five also spent the summer at Holkham, Norfolk. The species breeds at several wetlands on and near the French, Belgian and Dutch coasts and is in pole position for a colonisation attempt. The species is known from Roman and medieval archaeological sites in Britain, and a prospective recolonisation may not be quite as outlandish as it first seems.

Glossy Ibis Though restricted almost solely to the Mediterranean basin in Europe, Glossy Ibis undergoes periodic irruptions, inspired by the condition of wetlands, particularly in Iberia (birds ringed there have been observed here). Major British influxes occurred in 2007 and then every year from 2009, and have involved so many individuals that the species is no longer considered by the Rarities Committee, while a few have summered. From 1996, a major increase in the Spanish population occurred, and the birds have now spread to southern France, paralleling the range expansion of heron and egret species.

White Stork Formerly bred in Britain during the Middle Ages, and is still widespread and increasing in parts of the near-Continent. Apart from birds in collections spontaneously breeding, like the pinioned birds at Thrigby Hall Wildlife Park, Norfolk, last spring, White Stork hasn't bred in Britain since medieval times, when they reportedly nested on St Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh in 1416. However, the species' proximity and increasing population continues to raise hopes.

Black Stork Though this species is in decline in north-western Europe, it breeds in small numbers fairly close to the Channel coast in France. However, it has shown no sign of holding territory in Britain, and records are infrequent enough to still be considered by the Rarities Committee. An unlikely coloniser, on present form.

Squacco Heron Though very rare, Squacco Heron is annual in Britain and breeds as close as the Loire Valley in France (as do invasive Sacred Ibises). While there are more than 175 British records of this rarity, years in which several have been recorded have been frequent since there were three in 1977 and have shown a general increase this century with a promising peak over the months of May and June, though there has been a slight decline since a peak in 2007. However, there has been no sign of breeding as yet. ■



ADRIAN KETTLE

After a couple of failed attempts elsewhere, Purple Heron finally took its place in Britain's breeding avifauna at Dungeness, Kent, in May 2010, encouraging many birders to visit the reserve to observe them from a distance.

JOHN CRISPIN (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

Little Bittern bred just once in the 20th century after becoming extinct in Britain in the 19th. The species has now been confirmed to have bred in 2010 and 2013 at Ham Wall RSPB, Somerset, and probably a couple of other years.

century, but this was the first record for the 20th, and in some ways an augur of things to come in the 21st.

Occasional further singing males and summering birds were noted at various sites, until in 2010 a pair finally bred at Ham Wall RSPB on the clearly heron-friendly Somerset Levels. Pre-empted by a 'barking' male at the same site in 2009, another barking bird was followed by the logging of a female on 3 July. Both were noted making feeding flights, and the reserve was heavily guarded and watched for fear of the attentions of 'eggers', until a recently fledged juvenile was seen on 23rd.

Add to this more exotic species a resurgence of a British native in the form of **Bittern**. Underlining the improving state of our wetlands and the effectiveness of decades of conservation know-how, there have been more than 100 booming males in the last five years, up from a low of around 20 in 1995. This beats the post-war numbers, and is strongly indicative of the true number of breeding pairs.

The Med heads north

So why has Britain proved so attractive to what are generally thought of as Mediterranean large wading birds?

The most obvious driver could be climate change, with the increase in average global temperatures causing southern birds to be able to better tolerate Britain's climatic conditions, and the rapid spread of these species from warmer climes certainly tallies with what would be expected as an ecological effect of a warming climate. These effects are complex, but unseasonal flooding and warmer, wetter springs would appear to benefit waterbirds above all – particularly those that nest in trees or floating vegetation – though they are detrimental to many other species. There is no direct evidence for climate change having caused the eastward and northward spread of large wading birds, but it seems to be the most likely overarching reason.

Dispersal owing to the drying out of habitats further south (again, the possible effect of a changing climate) may also be at fault. This seems to have driven the Baillon's Crake dispersal in 2012 which led many to suspect that this species, too, might be on the verge of colonising Britain. Glossy Ibis irruptions are also widely blamed on this phenomenon. A parallel series of breeding attempts to those of the rarer herons has also occurred with Black-winged Stilt, after multiple visits in summer and a successful nesting attempt in 1983 (with other attempts pre-1945) culminated in two productive nests last year, and a serious influx this spring may yet produce further results.

Britain may be in line for a few more breeding attempts by non-native herons and other waterbird species, or even another colonisation or two, due to the warming globe. The next couple of decades on our wetlands could be exciting times indeed, despite this dark climatic undercurrent. ■

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ANDY HAY (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

Guardians of the rare

News that Black-winged Stilts and European Bee-eaters were attempting to breed in Britain last year mobilised conservation organisations to set up 24-hour protection. RSPB Campaigns Manager *Andre Farrar* looks at why and how such operations can be arranged.

Rare breeding birds have been hitting the headlines in recent decades, with some staying for good and others seemingly content to nest just once or twice. Collared Dove, Cetti's Warbler and Little Egret (see pages 34-38) all had their day as 'newbies', and look where they are now.

There's little doubt that there is a lot of excitement (I nearly said glamour, but that's not the word) around those eyebrow-raising confidential conversations about a new breeder. But when should one push the big red button and put in place a project to protect these birds, and when should they be left well alone?

In many cases the answer is obvious: the birds should be protected when discretion or confidentiality is impossible and the threat of human interference too great, either because the allure of the eggs of a novel nesting species is so high to the diminishing number of British egg collectors, or because either birds or eggs are at accidental or deliberate risk from surrounding land use or other disturbance.

Egg protection

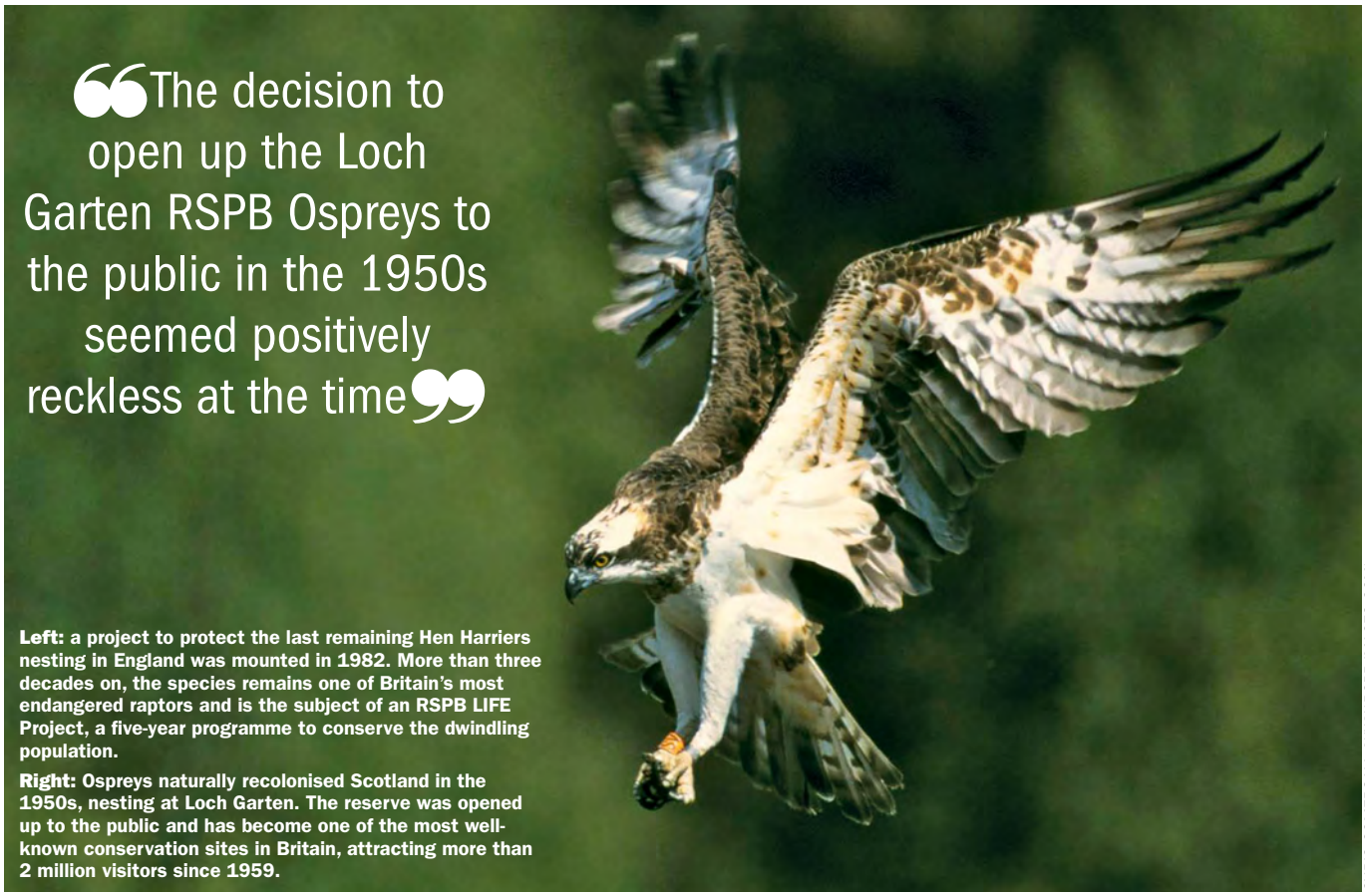
Protecting rare breeders is nothing new. In the RSPB's earliest days, observers were employed to deter egg collectors and other miscreants from pilfering tern eggs from colonies on the Lancashire coast or snaffling Northern Pintail eggs at Loch Leven, Perth and Kinross. The RSPB's first presence at its oldest nature reserve at Dungeness, Kent, before it was established, was in the form of guards looking after the breeding birds already present.

Many of those carefully watched locations have since become nature reserves, and none is more famous than Minsmere (see *Birdwatch* 265: 36-39). In research I did prior to the RSPB's centenary year in 1989, I met Dick Wolfendale – then in his 90s – who

ANDY HAY (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

ANDY HAY (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

European Bee-eaters successfully raised two young at Bishop Middleham Quarry nature reserve, Co Durham, in July 2002 (left). The RSPB and Durham Wildlife Trust staff and volunteers mounted a 24-hour watch (right) of the nest site as the species' rarity as a British breeding bird made it a target for egg collectors. Once the eggs hatched, a viewpoint was set up and thousands of visitors were able to enjoy watching the birds.



> “The decision to open up the Loch Garten RSPB Ospreys to the public in the 1950s seemed positively reckless at the time”

Left: a project to protect the last remaining Hen Harriers nesting in England was mounted in 1982. More than three decades on, the species remains one of Britain’s most endangered raptors and is the subject of an RSPB LIFE Project, a five-year programme to conserve the dwindling population.

Right: Ospreys naturally recolonised Scotland in the 1950s, nesting at Loch Garten. The reserve was opened up to the public and has become one of the most well-known conservation sites in Britain, attracting more than 2 million visitors since 1959.

CHRIS GOMERSALL (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

told me about a top secret mission in which he was sent to the Suffolk coast. When he got there he discovered that he was to guard the Avocets that had recently colonised the area, which had been previously flooded for war-time defences. Dick went on to warden the Minsmere and Havergate Island reserves.

Secrecy has always been part of the tactics of protecting rare breeding birds and always will be. Where possible, however, enabling people to share the moment has proved a winning combination with the birds’ protection. The decision to open up the Loch Garten RSPB Ospreys to the public in the 1950s seemed positively reckless at the time, but has been a model for many protection schemes since.

Saving the harrier

My own involvement started with a species that is even more topical today than it was in 1982, when I was sent to the Forest of Bowland in Lancashire to protect the last remaining breeding English Hen Harriers. With pairs numbering into double figures there was no need to provide 24-hour protection, but I did spend long watches on the hill getting to know one pair of birds in great detail, learning to observe their behaviour and almost starting to see the world through their eyes.

I also developed the paranoia that comes with the responsibility of protecting rare birds. Among the harriers was a pair of Peregrine Falcons tucked away near a public footpath. Early in the season I assumed the walkers on the path were genuinely enjoying a ramble, but as the weeks went by my suspicions grew – who could I trust? Secrecy seemed to be the watchword, until one day the man in the burger van stuck his head out of the window and bellowed across the car

RUSS SHERIFF

In 2014 Black-winged Stilts successfully fledged young in Britain for the first time in 27 years. The RSPB organised a 24-hour watch on the nests with the help of a rota of volunteers.

NEIL LARNER (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

Stone-curlew often breeds on arable farmland, where nests are liable to be destroyed by agricultural machinery. The only way to minimise such losses is to carry out labour-intensive nest protection work.

park: "How are the Peregrines?" That year it was good news for the harriers, but the Peregrines lost their clutch, replaced with painted bantam eggs by sneaky thieves.

Moving quickly is essential – often news comes in from birders and plans need to crystallise quickly if risks are to be avoided. This inevitably leads to some improvisation – a night in a sheep shelter on the top of the Yorkshire moors (I said glamorous was the wrong word!) kicked off an unexpected Montagu's Harrier project that eventually safely delivered three fledged young.

In 1997 we scrambled to get cover for the first pair of Hen Harriers to nest in Derbyshire for more than a century. We covered the first couple of nights with a hastily recruited warden, which bought us time to set up a rota of volunteers that brought the breeding attempt to a successful conclusion. Once the eggs had hatched, we opened the site to the public and more than 5,000 people came to see the harriers raise their three young to successful fledging.

ANDY HAY (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

An RSPB staff member installs a camera to monitor Stone-curlew nests from afar. This is part of the organisation's Stone-curlew Project, the aim of which is to produce a self-sustaining population of stone-curlews in Wiltshire.

Rained out

Black-winged Stilts have been in the news both this year and last, with two pairs (out of four attempts) raising young in 2014, and a substantial influx with unknown results this spring. Nearly two decades ago I helped mount a 24-nest protection for a pair that set up home in Cheshire – the investment of time and emotion into a pair of birds is considerable, and it was a huge disappointment that their nest was flooded out by torrential rain.

Committing to protect a pair of birds and boost their chances of success is at one level a question of mobilising resources, but at a human level it is more than that – it changes your perspective, both through the opportunity to learn so much about a species at first hand, and because you get fiercely protective and drawn into the project in ways that stay with you. My odd night shifts here and there have been nothing compared to the hard yards done by so many staff and volunteers over the years – and my respect and thanks goes to them all.

And still we have to do it. This year I visited the guys mounting the 24-hour protection on one of the pairs of Hen Harriers in the Forest of Bowland, and for a couple of hours the 32 years since I started at the RSPB slipped away as we watched a food pass and the harriers, once again nesting in the English uplands.

Nest protection is a fact of life for conservationists in a world where too many people perceive that they gain from the destruction of those nests. Let's keep a close eye on those birds that need it, but at a considerate distance, too. ■

CHRIS LLOYD

ANDY HAY (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

Cirl Buntings were once widespread across much of southern England, but are now rare and highly range restricted. RSPB research showed that loss of food sources and nest sites were the main drivers of the decline. The charity's Cirl Bunting Project was set up to help recreate and protect the habitats needed by the species.

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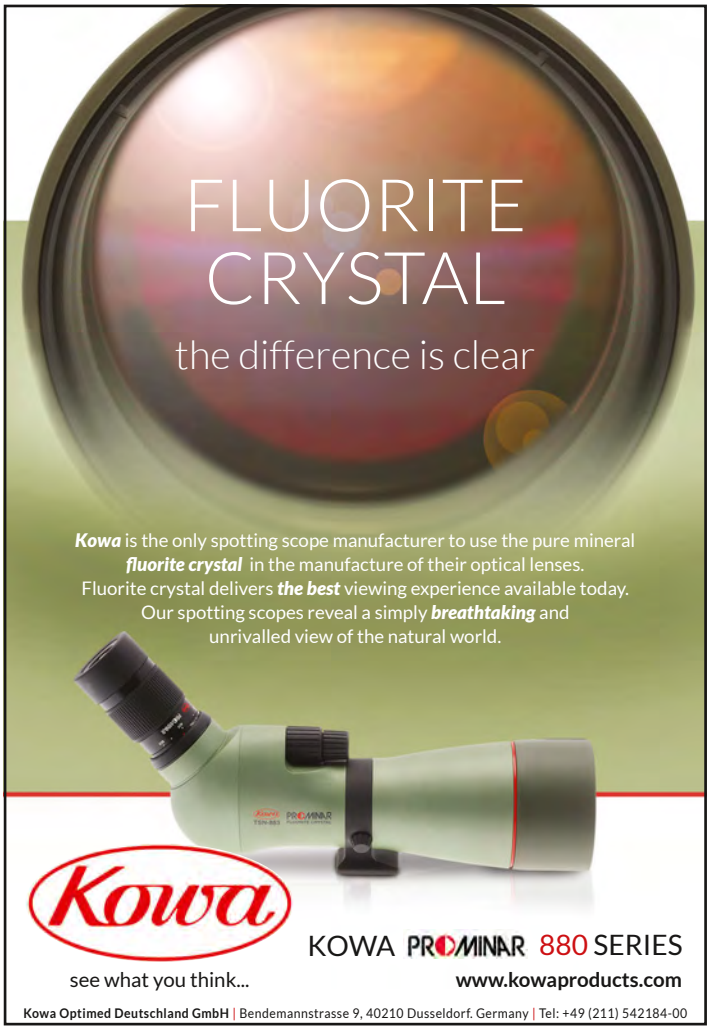
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Grasshopper, Savi's and River Warblers PHOTO GUIDE

1

ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

1 Grasshopper Warbler (Cley Marshes NWT, Norfolk, 21 April 2015). This is a classic portrait of a Grasshopper Warbler: perched on top of a bramble bush and, bill wide open, delivering its distinctive 'reeling' song. Clearly shown here is the characteristic 'head up tail down' posture, the softly streaked upperparts and the well-marked streaks in the undertail coverts. Singing birds such as this provide virtually our only opportunity to study this subtly attractive but enigmatic species.

PROFILE

ANDY STODDART is Vice Chairman of the Rarities Committee and has many years' birding experience. He is also author of several books and ID papers.

'Little brown jobs' can be the bane of the birder at any level, and there are few more elusive and harder to identify than the bush warblers of the genus *Locustella*. Several species get their names from their buzzing grasshopper- or locust-like songs, and this is often how they are first detected in the field. Patience could reveal a glimpse, but it can take several such views to piece together an identification. ID expert *Andy Stoddart* advises what to look for and how to recognise the 'default' species and two much rarer visitors to Britain.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Locustella warblers are among the most secretive and hence most enigmatic birds of all. In spring most of us will come across a Grasshopper Warbler, if only by sound, but there are two other vagrant possibilities to bear in mind: Savi's and River Warblers. Both are very rare, but have the potential to turn up almost anywhere with suitable habitat.

> "A typical encounter with Grasshopper Warbler begins by hearing its distinctive, high-pitched, insect-like reeling song"

Grasshopper Warbler

This species has a large Palearctic breeding range stretching from Ireland in the west to Mongolia in the east. The nominate subspecies breeds in western and central Europe and western Russia, and winters in west sub-Saharan Africa. Two or perhaps three other forms breed from the Caucasus across Asia, and some of them winter in the Indian subcontinent.

Grasshopper Warbler is exclusively a summer visitor to Britain. A relatively early migrant, it appears from mid-April and can occasionally be numerous at west coast bird observatories in spring. For most of us, however, it is not a common species. A typical encounter begins by hearing its distinctive, high-pitched, insect-like reeling song emanating from deep inside cover. Although the song carries for long distances, the bird itself can be notoriously hard to place, and to make matters worse, the song appears to move around as the bird turns its head.

Eventually, however, and with a little patience, it may be possible to locate the bird deep inside its chosen bush and sometimes it can even emerge onto a high perch to sing in full view. Although it sometimes sings during the day, it is more of a night vocalist and most likely to be heard at dawn or dusk.

Savi's Warbler

Savi's also breeds widely across Europe and Asia and winters discontinuously in sub-Saharan Africa. The nominate subspecies occurs across Europe and western Russia, with two other forms occurring across Asia.

This species used to be a regular, albeit very rare, breeding bird in Britain, largely confined to East Anglia and the South-East. In recent times, however, its appearances as a breeding bird have become ever more sporadic and it is now best regarded as simply a vagrant. Indeed it is now treated as a full rarity by the Rarities Committee.

It occurs mainly in spring and is invariably located by its song. This resembles the reeling of Grasshopper Warbler in its persistence, but is distinctly harsher and lower pitched. Furthermore, while Grasshopper Warbler favours bushes as songposts (albeit often within reedbeds), Savi's Warbler is a true reedbed bird and usually sings from the reeds themselves. This makes it particularly difficult to see, but again, with patience, it may be possible to see one ascend to the top of a reed stem. It is also a mainly night singer, best sought early and late in the day.

River Warbler

There is also a third *Locustella* possibility to consider in spring: River Warbler. This species breeds across eastern Europe and western Russia, wintering much further to the south in south-east Africa.

It has always been rare in Britain, with just 44 records to the end of 2013. These are split between spring and autumn, and while the latter are found at the usual coastal migration spots (almost exclusively in the Northern Isles), spring birds have occurred much more widely and randomly across the country. This is a species which could occur almost anywhere. Spring occurrences fall late in the season, either in the closing days of May or, more typically, in June or even July.

As with the other *Locustella* species described here, a spring River Warbler is unlikely to be discovered unless it is in song. Fortunately, this is quite distinctive. Though sharing the persistent, insect-like quality of its relatives, it does not give a steady reel, emitting instead a curious rhythmic, mechanical, pulsing *dzi … dzi … dzi … dzi*, often delivered from high in a bush. This is a loud song that will carry a significant distance, making its detection more likely. Again, the species is more of a night singer.

Identification

All three of the species featured here share the same *Locustella* structural characters: a long head and slender bill, long legs, strongly curved outer edge to the closed primaries, pale outer web to the second primary, broad, strongly graduated tail and very long undertail coverts almost reaching the tail tip.

Grasshopper Warbler is about the size of a Sedge Warbler, but Savi's and especially River Warblers are a size larger. However, such differences are not especially helpful in the field, and to identify your candidate to species you will need to note some plumage detail.

The separation of Grasshopper Warbler from its relatives is not too challenging on a good view. The 'mottled' or 'ruffled' pattern of dark feather centres in the crown and upperparts place it in the 'streaked' group of *Locustella*s (along with Lanceolated and Pallas's Grasshopper Warblers) and readily distinguish it from the plain-backed Savi's and River Warblers. It is also streaked in the undertail coverts, a feature often readily visible on a singing bird.

Our European Grasshopper Warblers come in two colour morphs, 'brown and white' and 'olive and yellow', but both types are similarly mottled above. The major pitfall is getting poor views (or good views in poor light) and concluding that the upperparts are unstreaked. A bit of misinterpretation of the song may then lead to an incorrect identification as Savi's.

Savi's and River Warblers are very similar, though the latter should show a neat 'necklace' of blurry striations across the upper breast and very broadly pale-tipped and dark-based undertail coverts. Savi's is usually entirely plain below (although some show some indistinct light lower throat spotting) and the undertail coverts are either uniform or only weakly tipped pale. ■

STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

2 Grasshopper Warbler (Hightown, Lancashire, 21 April 2007). This singing bird shows the structural features shared by all *Locustella* warblers – a long, slim body, long tail, very long undertail coverts and a subtle curve to the leading edge of the wing. This bird would be announcing its identity as a Grasshopper Warbler by its song and this identification is quickly confirmed by the weakly streaked, rather 'ruffled' appearance to the crown, mantle and scapulars, fine spotting across the lower throat and upper breast and heavy arrowhead marks in the undertail coverts. This is a rather brown-and-white individual.

HANS GEBUIS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

3 Savi's Warbler (Zederik, The Netherlands, 28 April 2005). The long undertail coverts and the slightly curved leading edge to the wing identify this bird as a *Locustella* warbler, as does the fine dark loral line giving a slightly more 'sharp' facial expression than the more 'bland-faced' *Acrocephalus* warblers such as Reed Warbler. Note also the relatively long (and bright pink) legs – an adaptation to a life spent creeping about in dense vegetation. The plain warm brown upperparts, unmarked throat and breast and smoothly buff-washed undertail coverts all confirm this bird as a Savi's Warbler, as would its song.

STEFAN PFÜTZKE (WWW.GREEN-LENS.DE)

4 River Warbler (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Germany, 20 May 2013). Some additional structural features of *Locustella* warblers are shown to perfection here – a long, spiky bill, a long, smooth forehead, long toes and a broad, strongly rounded tail. In terms of plumage, this bird shows apparently plain, unstreaked upperparts but strong vertical smudgy markings across the breast and strong transverse brown-and-white barring across the undertail coverts: it is a River Warbler. In life, this bird would be visibly trembling to the rhythm of its highly distinctive pulsing song.

5 Grasshopper Warbler (Two Tree Island, Essex, 17 April 2011). With its spiky bill, sloping forehead, long, broad, rounded tail, long undertail coverts and long toes, this is a classic *Locustella*. Its underparts appear unstreaked, so could it be a Savi's Warbler? A quick look at the undertail coverts disproves this theory, for they exhibit the classic heavy and well-defined arrowhead markings of a Grasshopper Warbler, while soft streaking is visible in the crown. This is an instructive bird, therefore, a reminder that some Grasshopper Warblers can show such weak throat/breast spotting as to appear unmarked. Note that this individual is also more olive and yellow than that in photo 2.

STEVE ARLOW (WWW.BIRDERSPLAYGROUND.CO.UK)

6 Savi's Warbler (Hortobágy, Hungary, 16 June 2011). This bird also appears wholly unmarked below, but a check of the undertail coverts shows that this is indeed a Savi's Warbler. This feather tract is typically washed a plain bright buff in this species. Also visible here is a plain, unstreaked crown, the typical 'sharp' facial expression of a *Locustella* warbler and, again, the long legs and toes. The reedbed habitat is entirely normal for this species.

STEFAN PFÜTZKE (WWW.GREEN-LENS.DE)

7 River Warbler (Hortobágy, Hungary, 15 May 2012). Head on, this singing River Warbler is easily identified, showing to perfection the characteristic long blurry streaks right across the breast and the boldly brown-and-white barred undertail coverts. In life, this bird would already have grabbed the attention with its rhythmic pulsing song. In this position the true breadth of the *Locustella* tail can also be appreciated, as can the length of the undertail coverts which reach close to the end of the tail.

NEIL BOWMAN

STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

8 Grasshopper Warbler (Hightown, Lancashire, 29 April 2008). This back-on view of a Grasshopper Warbler provides a good opportunity to examine the nature of its upperpart streaking. The classic slightly mottled effect is caused by the fact that each mantle and scapular feather has a thin pale brown tip which disrupts what would otherwise be continuous streaking. Also easy to see in this portrait are the soft crown streaking and two typical *Locustella* features: a thin dark loral line and a curved outer edge to the wing.

DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

9 Savi's Warbler (Jahra Pools, Kuwait, 1 March 2012). This bird is strikingly and obviously plain above and, at first glance, it resembles an *Acrocephalus* warbler. However, its true identity as a *Locustella* is confirmed by its quite long, spiky bill, low, sloping forehead, long, tubular body, long and very broad rounded tail, strongly curved outer edge to the wing and long bright pink legs and toes. The face pattern can also be examined closely, here showing the typical *Locustella* thin loral line. With such unequivocally plain upperparts, this has to be either a Savi's or a River Warbler, and a glance at the wholly unmarked lower throat and breast confirm that it is the former.

JOHN CARTER

10 River Warbler (Applecross, Highland, 11 July 2009). With this bill, head and wing shape and such long undertail coverts, this is clearly a *Locustella* warbler. Its upperparts appear genuinely unmarked, so the choice is narrowed to the two plain-backed species. The breast pattern is hard to see here, but a suggestion of vertical blurry streaking can be seen at the breast-sides, strongly suggesting River Warbler. The undertail coverts pattern confirms this diagnosis, the brown feather bases and broad pale tips being characteristic of this species. Typically, this River Warbler is a slightly 'colder' earth-brown colour above than the brighter buff Savi's Warbler.

11 Grasshopper Warbler (Garrison, St Mary's, Scilly, 9 October 2005). Autumn migrant *Locustella* warblers rarely give anything more than a flight view or perhaps a quick, half-obscured glimpse. A view of this quality is most unusual. In autumn, it is vital to be quick, homing in on key features in the few seconds available. Here, the softly mottled upperparts (note also the diffuse dark feather centres in the uppertail coverts) readily rule out the two rare plain-backed species.

STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

12 Savi's Warbler (Tuscany, Italy, 12 September 2009). This too would be an exceptional view of an autumn *Locustella*! Here the overwhelming impression is of plain uniformity and bright buff plumage hues. These two features alone suggest Savi's Warbler, an identification confirmed by the wholly unmarked breast and the plain buff-washed undertail coverts. An additional generic feature of *Locustellas* is also visible here: a contrasting pale outer web to the long outermost primary.

DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

13 River Warbler (Fair Isle, Shetland, 11 September 2012). This plain-looking *Locustella* is clearly either a Savi's or a River Warbler. At first sight, its relatively plain breast might suggest the former, but autumn River Warblers can show much reduced breast streaking and in fact what is visible here strongly indicates the latter species. The real clincher would be the undertail coverts, but unfortunately they are obscured here. Note that the pale outer web to the outermost primary – a generic *Locustella* feature – is visible too.

CRAIG ROUND

WILL MILES

14 Eastern Grasshopper Warbler (Fair Isle, Shetland, 20 September 2012). Sadly, *Locustella* identification can be more complicated than the three-way choice presented in this article. This bird is clearly streaked above, so cannot be either of the plain-backed species, but it looks tiny. Could it be a Lanceolated Warbler, the small Russian-breeding counterpart of Grasshopper Warbler (and an annual vagrant to Britain)? It is in fact a Grasshopper Warbler of one of the small eastern forms *straminea* or *mongolica*, but confirming which is problematic, however, and would need to rely on DNA analysis. The bird pictured here is to date the only proven occurrence in Britain.

REBECCA NASON (WWW.REBECCANASON.COM)

15 Lanceolated Warbler (Fair Isle, Shetland, 2 October 2012). This similarly small and compact-looking streaky *Locustella* shows a convincing set of Lanceolated Warbler features and can be confidently identified as such. Note the strongly streaked upperparts with the dark feather centres reaching the feather tip and therefore aligning to form continuous streaks. Also obvious in this exceptional image are a very short primary projection, crisply contrasting dark tertial centres, short dark marks in the undertail coverts and obvious streaking in the breast leading into drop-shaped marks in the rear flanks.

TREVOR CODLIN

16 Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler (left) and Grasshopper Warbler (right) (Titchfield Haven NNR, Hampshire, 6 September 2014). These two apparently similar streaked *Locustellas* represent two species. On the right is a Grasshopper Warbler, while the bird on the left is a vagrant Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler from Siberia. Note the latter's dark grey hues in the crown and nape, the bright slightly rufous tones and very heavy black streaking in the upperparts, a rufous cast to the rump and subtly darker tail feathers with thin greyish-white tips to all bar the central feathers. Also visible are small whitish 'spots' formed where the outer fringes to the tertials extend around the feather tip onto the inner web.

Find your own *Locustella*

GRASSHOPPER Warbler can't be said to be a common species, with a breeding population estimated at just 13,000 pairs. It is sparsely distributed in summer in damp, tussocky grassland, marsh and young conifer plantations over the majority of Britain and Ireland, bar the very highest areas. This secretive species gets much harder to see after July once its chicks have hatched, but can still be present during August and early September, when luck can provide fleeting views in appropriate habitat or at coastal migration watchpoints and bird observatories.

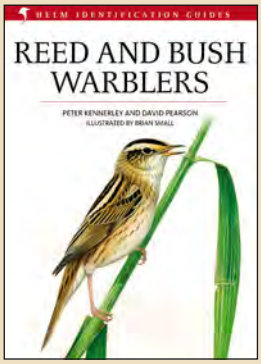
Decreasing over much of the country, Grasshopper Warbler is Red-listed as being of conservation concern, but there are still healthy and slightly increasing populations in north-west Scotland, south-west Ireland and Wales, though ungrazed and openly vegetated sites could produce a reeling bird almost anywhere.

Savi's Warbler is a far rarer species despite being a former breeder in a few southern parts of England and Wales. However, many extensive wetland reserves in the southern two-thirds of the country have had a singing male at some point in the last two decades. Recent long-staying birds have attracted attention at Tacumshin, Co Wexford (T 0406), Newport Wetlands (ST 3782), Blacktoft Sands RSPB, East Yorkshire (S E8423), Wicken Fen NT, Cambridgeshire (TL 5570), Lakenheath Fen RSPB (TL 7286), Minsmere RSPB (TM 4766) and Walberswick NNR (TM 4773), Suffolk, and even as far north as Loch of Strathbeg RSPB, Aberdeenshire (NK 0758).

The species tends to require extensive reedbeds, and it is worth checking any wetland reserve which features a large stand. It is worth familiarising yourself with the song, as adjacent habitats can also hold Grasshopper Warbler, which sounds confusingly similar to the uninitiated.

River Warbler is rarer still, being less than annual. It breeds in damp deciduous riverside and swamp habitats within range, and consequently often turns up in similar habitats in Britain. The majority of records (more than half at 23 birds) have been from Shetland, but others have shown up at more compatible locations, with recent long-stayers at Beachy Head, East Sussex (TV 5895), Thorpe, Norfolk (TM 4398), and Applecross, Highland (NG 7144), being particularly well-attended by birders. However, it is hard to predict where the next one will turn up outside the Northern Isles. ■

FURTHER READING



***Reed and Bush Warblers* by Peter Kennerley, David Pearson and Brian Small (Christopher Helm)**
This detailed and comprehensive identification guide primarily covers the genera *Acrocephalus*, *Locustella*, *Cettia* and *Bradypterus*, together with a few smaller related genera. To the uninitiated, these are the archetypal 'little brown jobs', and as if they weren't hard enough to identify anyway, many of them are hard to see as well! This authoritative handbook covers their identification in breathtaking detail, illustrated with line drawings, sonograms, wonderful colour plates and photographs. It has become the ultimate reference for these challenging birds.
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Quiz bird

ATTRACTED by an insect-like buzzing or reeling song while working marshland at your local patch, you are pleased to see a less familiar warbler species. Having checked out its long, sharp beak, wide tail and very long undertail coverts, you know that it is a *Locustella* – but which species? Is it the more expected Grasshopper Warbler, or could it be one of its much rarer congeners, Savi's or River Warbler?

Closer ventral views reveal quite plain underparts which initially give little away. However, prolonged observation gives you enough information to give a final identification. Will you be ringing the news into BirdGuides?

How to enter

Once you think you have the right answer, let us know at **bit.ly/bw276LocustellaQuiz**. Be quick, though, as the competition closes on 12 June! The answer will be available online at **www.birdwatch.co.uk/win** from 15 June, and the first randomly chosen reader with the correct answer will win a copy of *Advanced Bird ID Guide* by Nils Van Duivendijk. ■

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Covert warblers

DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

Every birder must be delighted with the split of Subalpine Warbler into first two and now three species, right? Wrong! *D I M Wallace* begs to differ, contrasting the benefits of traditional knowledge and field skills with modern lab techniques in this personal critique of the proposal.

Looking at the systematics of Mediterranean warblers way back in 1902, Henry Dresser gave earlier divisions of 29 species into constituent taxa short shrift. He did, however, recognise Western Olivaceous Warbler and 'Bowman's Warbler', alias the easternmost *momus* form of Sardinian Warbler, as separate species. Otherwise, he allowed as a definite subspecies only *jerdoni* (now *crassirostris*) Eastern Orphean Warbler – concluding with a total list of 30 forms.

Ninety years on from Dresser's review, and with molecular studies still in their infancy, the taxonomy of Western Palearctic warblers was further elucidated by Kees Roselaar in *The Birds of the Western Palearctic* (1992). As his 'field colleague', I fully supported Kees's listing of 27 species within the biotopes of Mediterranean islands and coasts, and their total radiation therein into 50 subspecies. The latter were located mostly at the far ends of east-west clines or on islands. Of the six species of restricted range still considered monotypic, only Melodious Warbler was a western species; the other five were all located in or around the central and eastern sectors of the Mediterranean. Dresser's splits of Western Olivaceous and Bowman's Warblers were not reinstated.

The 'small print' of Roselaar's 1992 statements on geographical variation contained trailers for further systematic revisions of four Mediterranean warbler species. More than 20 years later, the increased combination of 'bench' taxonomy with field examination, new sensitivities to voice and behaviour signals, digital photographic detail and chemical analyses has indeed delivered further promotions of Mediterranean subspecies to species level. These comprise final nods to Dresser's Western Olivaceous Warbler and Iberian Chiffchaff, and the acceptance of species pairs for Bonelli's and Marmora's Warblers. Intriguingly, their disparate ranges – two western mainland, two western islands and only one eastern mainland – reverse the apparent easterly bias in the locations of the first six monotypic species.

> "My search for obvious field characters yielded only three in male Eastern and Western Subalpine Warblers"

Surprise split

A century of increasingly detailed examination has described a marked radiation of warbler taxa from all over the Mediterranean basin. Even so, the recent double split of Subalpine Warbler surprised me. The case for Moltoni's Warbler is constructed with care, and due deference is paid to the earliest telling portrait by Temminck in 1820. The combined result from both old and new disciplines appears inarguable, though I am perplexed as to why this second monotypic species of the western Mediterranean islands also occurs in northern Italy, where it breeds sympatrically with Eastern Subalpine Warbler. Perhaps there will be more to

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BILL BASTON (WWW.BILLBASTON.COM)

Above, left to right: male Moltoni's Warbler, male Western Subalpine Warbler and male Eastern Subalpine Warbler. Formerly considered a single species, these three forms have recently been split into three full species. The split was mostly based on genetic differences between the three taxa, although vocalisations and subtle plumage details were also considered. Additionally, Eastern Subalpine and Moltoni's Warblers have areas of overlapping breeding ranges in northern Italy without any apparent hybridisation. However, is this enough to support the splits? As can be seen from the photos above, even spring males are very similar in appearance. Would the "often bolder submoustachial stripes, slightly darker breasts and paler bellies" of Eastern Subalpine, for example, always be obvious in the field?

Below: a new subspecies of Western Subalpine Warbler has also been recognised. Named ***S inornata iberiae***, it is a breeding endemic of the Iberian Peninsula, southern France and extreme north-western Italy. It is described as being consistently less yellow-tinged than the nominate form.

CARLOS BOCOS

follow on that surprising escape from island endemism.

The re-assortment of four other subalpine subspecies into a western pair (*inornata* and *iberiae*) and an eastern duo (*cantillans* and *albistriata*) is initially appealing, but it leans heavily on genetic relationships found by other authors. Disappointingly, my search for obvious field characters yielded only three in males. For Eastern Subalpine compared to Western, these were often bolder submoustachial stripes, slightly darker breasts and paler bellies, and (if visible) distinctive long white wedges on the inner web of their second outermost tail feathers.

Does this very limited suite of subtle marks and perhaps tonal dialects in songs suffice for the birds themselves to tell each other apart, or for us to divide the four taxa into a second and third species? My trysts with Subalpines in eastern Morocco, southern Spain, north-east Spain and adjacent France, and also Croatia, have prompted no note on differing appearances, despite my addiction to trying to see subspecies in the field. Without more convincing living proof, I have to regard the splits

›

of Western Subalpine and Eastern Subalpine as 'not proven', or at most evolution in progress.

Hence my further shock when the British Ornithological Union's Records Committee (BOURC) – but not yet its Taxonomic Sub-Committee – endorsed the three-way split and accepted first specimen records of all three newly proposed species. Impressively, the BOURC eschewed bald percentage comparisons of genetic divides and sought matches to pre-identified individuals from known populations. It would be churlish to deny any of the three spring male vagrants their sources, but I cannot see that these add anything to the overall debate on Subalpine speciation.

Clinal differences

I have plotted the mean values of seven biometrics of Moltoni's (from Svensson 2013, Table 2) as a graph. There were two striking results: firstly, measurements of Moltoni's scattered unevenly between Eastern Subalpine and Western Subalpine, so it doesn't seem to occupy a clinal size between the two; secondly, relative shortness in

DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

Juvenile Moltoni's Warbler. Photographed in northern Italy in the breeding season, well within the described range for Moltoni's, this immature bird can safely be identified as this species.

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HARVEY VAN DIEK (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

Left: female Western Subalpine Warbler; right: female Eastern Subalpine Warbler. Identification becomes even more difficult when it comes to females. Plumage differences are subtle at best and separation of the two is likely to rely on biometrics of birds in the hand.

Western Subalpine and relative length in Eastern Subalpine did show in the outer wing length and mid-wing breadth measurements, as well as the extension of first primary from primary coverts. Do these tell in Eastern Subalpine of the greater wing area required for its longer migrations, or are they just the ends of a longitudinal size cline, north of Moltoni's main island range? They certainly do not necessarily point to three separate species.

I also looked again at the birds' genetic divergences. Svensson argued that in the Subalpine complex mitochondrial DNA differences of 4-5 per cent formed persuasive proof of speciation. This 'pass as species' bracket is, however, less testing than the 6-11 per cent differences presented by six *Acrocephalus* and *Iduna* warblers with European distributions. The 'pass as Subalpine species' bar is set higher than the average 1.8 per cent difference of nine warbler subspecies, but I note that Svensson's text is not free of his traditional taxonomic caution. *Surely we need some firm rules to assess DNA test results?*

Finally, what of Svensson's acute observations on Subalpine outer tail feather patterns? Having strong faith in imperceptible (by humans) species-specific avian signals, I dived into Euan Dunn's *BWP* summary of Subalpine behaviour. In the pair-bonding section was a telling observation of a male that cocked its tail over its back, exposing its black-and-white undertail pattern, and constantly turned it towards a nearby female. Elsewhere in *BWP*, exaggerated tail movement was mentioned for all *Sylvia* warblers. Full tail-cocks were recorded for 10 species, but without clear links to the degree of exposed feather pattern or purpose of such actions.

There is a clear opportunity for any jizz enthusiasts to get out in the field in the early breeding season when all birds need to find partners and finally see this plumage detail being used.

The way forward

Do we field amateurs just throw in the towel and let the professionals target yet more subspecies by DNA tracing? Perhaps even Bowman's Warbler could be resurrected, this name being used for the markedly pale-saddled and pale-bodied Sardinian Warblers that members of the Azraq expeditions of the mid-1960s saw in Syria and Jordan. These were far more unlike their western nominate relative than any two of the three supposedly different Subalpine species.

In writing this critique of one initiative in modern avian taxonomy, I intend no disrespect to any of the industrious authors who have contributed to the current Subalpine split proposal or the Rarities Committee's distillation of it as a new approach to recording its inhabitants. I just want to express my personal faith that the birds themselves – if full species – have developed fail-safe clues to their own status and must signal or sound them in the field. We just have to catch up. *Certainly the birds never have to choose between arbitrary limits of DNA traces and the like!* ■

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BILL ODDIE

Carry on killing

Bill Oddie **returned to Malta this spring to help document illegal bird killing. He recounts his experience there and his sadness that spring shooting will continue.**

This spring I witnessed one of the most sickening sights I have ever seen. A gang of men leering at TV cameras, pumping their fists, cheering, chanting and laughing. Who were they and what were they celebrating? Football fans cheering their team? Lads at a stag party? In fact they were hunters celebrating having retained the 'right' to continue shooting migrant birds.

For many years Malta has been notorious for bird killing, and people from all over Europe have been protesting and holding 'watch camps' during the spring and autumn seasons. Have things got better or worse? There may be fewer hunters than there used to be, but then there are undoubtedly a lot fewer birds. However, numbers do not adequately convey the horror of the scene. You have to be there.

I was there this spring, along with observers from the League Against Cruel Sports (LACS); we were working with the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) and BirdLife Malta. I knew the routine from previous visits. Each morning, everyone gathers before dawn in a gently sloping valley near the coast. Hunters are already ensconced in their hides. They are armed with shotguns; we are armed with cameras – a sort of mobile CCTV team hoping to gather evidence and aids to identification such as licence plate numbers.

Lured in

The only apparent bird sounds at this point are the constant rhythmic calls of Common Quail. But they are not real birds – they are recorded lures. Just as the European Turtle Doves silhouetted on the treetops are plastic decoys. We can be sure of this because there is no gunfire yet. But there will be. As soon as a real bird breaks cover, it triggers a fusillade of bullets.

According to an extraordinary EU concession, it is legal in Malta to shoot Common Quail and – even more absurdly – European Turtle Dove, but nothing else in spring. Somehow, though, I can't imagine a hunter with rifle in one hand and field guide in the other, working out which species he is aiming at, and the fact is they do shoot everything.

FILIP WIECKOWSKI

Common Cuckoo is Red Listed in the UK as a Species of Conservation Concern. In Malta it was the first species to fall victim to this year's spring hunting season.

> "According to an extraordinary EU concession, it is legal to shoot Common Quail and – even more absurdly – European Turtle Dove"

Nevertheless, we arrived from Gatwick on 11 April 2015 hoping it would be a date to go down in history. After years of pleading and protest, the prime minister had agreed to a referendum in which the people of Malta would decide whether or not they were in favour of spring shooting.

Pre-polling day predictions had suggested that the anti-hunt lobby was slightly ahead. Alas, the predictions were wrong. The next morning we heard that the hunters had won by 2,000 votes. It was a meagre majority, and meant that almost half of the Maltese people had voted against spring shooting. But it was still a defeat. To the bellowing, chanting shooters I was watching on TV, though, it was a glorious victory. They could carry on killing.

However, whether it was an effort to show sympathy with both sides, or a genuine concern that the world might be watching, Prime Minister Muscat's speech at least nodded towards impartiality. He began by admitting that he had voted with the shooters – no surprise there – but he also acknowledged that nearly half his citizens wished their countryside and their wildlife to be left peaceful and safe.

FRANK VINCENTZ (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

A Maltese hunter and his dog at St Mark's Tower peninsula, Naxxar.

He concluded by reiterating that in the past much of the shooting had been illegal, and that this would no longer be tolerated and the hunters must behave or be punished. We couldn't help relishing the image of a bunch of unruly schoolboys being called before the headmaster and told that if they break the rules once more they will be gated, and once more after that expelled. If only. It was a small ray of hope, albeit rendered inevitably fragile by politicians' seeming inability to stick to their promises.

The rest of that day there was sadness, disappointment, anger and sporadic tearfulness, alleviated by much hugging. There was also determination. The following day we would be back in the valley at dawn on a quest to capture evidence of illegal shooting and present it to the PM, with the challenge: "What are you going to do now?"

It was two days later that a Common Cuckoo had the dubious honour of becoming the first martyr to the cause. A team from BirdLife documented the crime. The video shows a bird flying. There is the sound of gunshot and the bird plummets from the sky. The hunter is seen scurrying from his hide; he realises he is being watched and scuttles to his car, leaving his victim dying somewhere in the grass. The team spread out and search the field. The bird is found: definitely dead and definitely shot. Blood seeping from the bullet wound, the wing and tail feathers mangled and broken.

There is perhaps no species more symbolic of migration than Common Cuckoo. Its call is one of the most widely cherished sounds of summer. That the corpse of a cuckoo should be the first proof that some of the shooters in Malta are too addicted to killing to be able to control themselves is grimly poetic. So, will there be justice?

Waiting for justice

As I write, we await the response of the prime minister. I don't sympathise, but I do concede that he is in a tricky situation. Does he punish hunters by suspending the current shooting season? Or does he simply issue another 'last-chance' warning, and infuriate the 49 per cent of Maltese who voted 'no', let alone the dedicated volunteers of various NGOs.

There are few things that sour this frequently hateful world more than gratuitous cruelty, especially when the perpetrators revel in it, whether they are hunters in Malta, trappers in Cyprus or game shooters in Britain. This is why I support the LACS. I was pretty glum when we got back to Gatwick, but was disproportionally cheered by seeing two Magpies and a Carrion Crow shuffling around a roadside field. I hope they enjoy their freedom. They wouldn't last two minutes in Malta. ■

• As we went to press, it was announced that the Maltese hunting season had been brought to a premature end this year. After a Kestrel with two shot wounds fell into a school on 27 April, Malta's government ordered a stop to the hunting three days before it was due to officially close. The hunter responsible, Kirstin Mifsud, was sentenced to one year in jail, fined €5,000 and had his hunting licence revoked.

"The hunter is seen scurrying from his hide; he realises he is being watched and scuttles to his car, leaving his victim dying in the grass"

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The final frontier

With just 83 accepted records in Britain, White's Thrush is a rarity-hunter's dream. That it breeds within the Western Palearctic may come as a surprise to many birders.

Inset: White-winged Lark is a very rare vagrant to western Europe and was a tick for the whole group.

NEIL BOWMAN

Russia's Ural Mountains are a Western Palearctic outpost for a range of mouth-watering Siberian species that breed nowhere else in Europe. An intrepid group of birders visited this remote region and discovered fantastic birds and stunning scenery. *Josh Jones* recounts the exciting story.

JOSH JONES

It's one-thirty in the morning and a gentle breeze ripples the tent in which I lie. Aside from a few spots of rain gently splashing on the canvas, the silence of the twilight is punctuated only by a haunting song emanating from the forest nearby. Delivered with remarkable simplicity, the mournful whistles only accentuate the eeriness and uncertainty of what lies beyond our chamber's flimsy walls.

We're pitched in Russia's Ural Mountains, just over 60 degrees north. The song has been unrelenting since our arrival a couple of hours previously. Its source is one of the Ural's most sought-after yet elusive birds, a species many western European birders only dream of clapping eyes on: White's Thrush. Here in the Urals they sing throughout the night, their preference for nocturnality a striking example of a fallacy in the bird world – though occasionally encountered during the day, males start to sing their shadowy ensemble as the sun sinks and daylight ebbs away.

To many European birders the prospect of watching and listening to White's Thrushes on their breeding grounds is both exotic and distant, and that this enigmatic *Zoothera* breeds in Europe at all comes as something of a surprise. It is actually just one of a number of exciting 'Sibes' that make this stretch of mountains their home. Glancing at a list of breeding species that may be found in the region is enough to make European birders weep. Stunning though they are, even White's Thrushes are not the highlights here …

Palearctic outpost

Running north to south, the Ural Mountains extend some 1,550 miles from the Arctic Ocean to north-west Kazakhstan, forming the natural boundary between Europe and Asia. For those birders that keep a Western Palearctic (WP) list, the region's eastern border closely follows this mountain chain before diverting slightly to follow its namesake river south into Kazakhstan.

Along this often spectacular montane ridge, habitats include bleak tundra, unspoilt taiga forest, beautiful riparian woodland, wet marshes and, further south, open plains, steppe and even semi-desert. Such a rich array of environments equates to an impressive range of species, as we were to discover on our fortnight-long visit.

Despite the obvious allure of the Urals as a birding destination, the mountain range has seldom been visited by European birders. Organising trips to Russia has traditionally proved challenging, with the almost complete lack of spoken English making logistics far from straightforward. Following a successful expedition by a French team in summer 2013, our team of six decided to fly to Yekaterinburg in June 2014 to explore for ourselves. Mid-June is the optimum time to visit as a number of the region's special birds don't arrive until then – spring can be quite late this far north.

And so, there we were: lying in our tents, listening to the drizzle and waiting for the light to become birdable. Gradually the whistles of White's Thrushes were replaced by a building chorus of mysterious songs and, at 4 am

›

KRIS DE ROUCK

Siberian Rubythroat is almost mythical in Britain, with just 10 accepted records. Conditions for seeing it in Kvarkush were certainly not ideal, but the striking face pattern and bright red throat were obvious.

Below: the team trekking through the mountains and forest. The blue skies are in stark contrast to the cloud and drizzle in which the rubythroat was located!

it seemed respectable to start preparing for our hike up to the Ural ridge.

The anonymity of the unfamiliar voices was soon extinguished. Siberian Chiffchaffs, Greenish and Arctic Warblers, Olive-backed Pipits and Red-flanked Bluetails were delightfully numerous in the mixed woodland. Little Buntings *ticked*, Black-throated Thrushes *chacked* and Bluethroats sang heartily. In the boggier areas Yellow-browed Warblers occupied almost every tree, their dainty refrain echoing around us in such incredible abundance that it instantly became easy to understand why this species is now one of the most numerous autumn warblers on British coasts.

Among the many Common Cuckoos, Oriental Cuckoos could be heard giving their softly resonating, Hoopoe-like *pu-pu* – though seeing them was a different matter. More familiar taiga species such as Nutcracker, Siberian Tit, Parrot Crossbill and Pine Grosbeak were all present, as were Black and Willow Grouse. The high-pitched song of Hazel Grouse was at first difficult to pick out among the crescendo of Yellow-browed Warblers, but it too was common.

Seeing Sibes

We strolled for miles that day and the next, taking it all in. Seeing on their breeding grounds so many of those classic Sibe species that we yearned to find back home each autumn, and in such profusion, was what dreams were made of. The sheer number of birds and unspoilt habitat only served to show how pristine this corner of European Russia remains – reinforced by the fact that the nearest settlement, Severouralsk, lies some 30 miles to the east. This really was as close to a birding paradise as I'd experienced.

Though the weather can be glorious in June, 2014 in the North Urals generally proved dingy and cold. Our four days were demanding to say the least: rain was never far away, sun a precious commodity, and we were routinely wet and cold. Our two main targets were also proving a challenge

JOSH JONES

JOSH JONES

JOSH JONES

Above: the Urals are the only area within Europe in which Black-throated Accentor breeds; the species hasn't been recorded in Britain. One of the team's main targets, a couple of brief sightings were achieved.

Inset: this stunning male Long-tailed Rosefinch was another much-wanted target. Essentially an Asian bird, the species was in good supply in its only European outpost.

to pin down. In two-and-a-half days on the main Ural ridge we had just two relatively brief sightings of Black-throated Accentor, a scarce breeder here in its only European outpost.

Our attention turned to our other target, arguably one of the most iconic species on the Western Palearctic list. Like White's Thrush, the range of Siberian Rubythroat just about creeps into Europe, and the Kvarkush plateau is perhaps the most accessible location at which to find it.

Though snow remained above the treeline, summer migrants were everywhere; Black-throated Thrushes were particularly numerous and our first Great Snipe of the trip were seen. Yomping on several hundred metres further, a rich Nightingale-like song erupted from the dense willow scrub that typifies these slopes. It was a rubythroat.

As if to exemplify just how tough birding can be here, a perfectly timed bank of low cloud rolled in and visibility was reduced to less than 20 m in seconds. The wind picked up, the temperature dropped and the drizzle began. Our quarry also stopped singing, and that was that.

The woeful conditions persisted the next day. After two gruelling ascents of the mountain we'd had neither sight nor sound of the rubythroat, and exhaustion and hypothermia were setting in as we traipsed blindly around in the fog. By mid-afternoon we'd given up: the tents were packed and cars loaded, but we lacked a team member. Where was Kris? Was he lost? Had he lost track of time?

No, he'd gone and done the impossible: he'd found a rubythroat, just above the treeline. I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. A third climb up to the foggy abyss on Kvarkush was an unappealing prospect, but the potential reward would make it all worthwhile.

And so it did. A nervous wait was interrupted by commotion from within the willows as two male rubythroats came tumbling out into the snow, locked in battle and totally oblivious to six soggy birders, gawping in disbelief just yards away. The scuffle was quickly over and while one darted off back into cover another sat recovering, low in a birch. Visibility was abysmal, but the black-and-white facial pattern and glorious red throat positively glowed. Despondency turned to elation and there was a buoyancy in our steps as we descended the mountain for the final time. The impending 12-hour drive back to Yekaterinburg was looking more bearable.

Steppe sunshine

Two days after leaving behind the dreary skies and taiga forests, we were stood more than 600 miles to the south, overlooking rolling steppe bathed in warm sunshine. The Orenburg region is unrecognisable from the surroundings we'd left 48 hours previously, yet this area still forms part of the same mountain chain. Here the Urals are reduced to little more than low, rolling hills and the climate, habitat and birdlife are distinct once more. Having had great success further north, we'd decided to visit the area in the hope of finding steppe species otherwise possible only in neighbouring Kazakhstan.

The song of countless Skylarks echoed all around us, Ortolans and Yellow Wagtails were busy feeding young and, as we set up camp by the Ural River – here acting as the WP boundary – Barred and Paddyfield Warblers darted about in the adjoining scrub. We paused to admire a male Red-footed Falcon shoot through, before picking up an altogether larger raptor in the distance – adult Eastern Imperial Eagle. The problem was that it was on the other side of the river, in Asia, and so outside the WP, which allowed for some light-hearted banter among the team as to whether it's tickable on regional lists!

After the toughness of our first week in the north, there was a feel-good sense of relief and gratitude as the evening sun warmed our bones, though we were soon sent scurrying for our tents as an almighty thunderstorm erupted from nowhere at dusk.

By sunrise the skies had returned to an unbroken blue and we were out of our tents in time to admire two adult Pallas's Gulls, regal in their black-hooded summer dress, navigating their way along the river. The day was to be our first searching for four target species across the expansive grasslands, though the big issue was that we didn't really know where to look – it was a speculative mission.

Next to no recent information exists on the birds of Orenburg, and our scant gen was based on 30-year-old Russian papers and a few hastily exchanged emails. The general message? 'The birds you're looking for are probably still there, but you'll need more than a few days to find them and even then luck needs to be on your side.' In truth, we found that as thrilling as it was daunting. We were in uncharted territory.

Swathes of plain around the city of Orsk, the south-eastern outpost of European Russia, have been lost to agriculture and finding unspoilt steppe is a difficult task in itself. It was mid-afternoon by the time we eventually found a promising tract: lots of wormwood and nothing artificial. It was hot and windy, the heat haze making visibility poor. We scoured the area with intensity, walking miles between us. Nothing. But then, after an uninterrupted hour of Skylarks, something much larger stirred from the ground just a few feet from me. It flew, and there was no mistaking that wing pattern: a White-winged Lark, our most-wanted target and a new bird for us all.

Birds alive

Despite habitat degradation, Orenburg is still alive with birds and our speculative four-day excursion was a resounding success. Of our four primary targets, we saw three. A number of White-winged Larks were seen either side of the Ural River and Red-headed Buntings were found in at least three spots; watching a singing male gleaming in the early morning light ranked as one of the trip highlights. We struck lucky with Demoiselle Crane, fluking a fly-over pair one afternoon, though we could not find Black Lark.

Once again, it is a region characterised by abundance. There are White-winged and Black Terns over the marshes, Black-winged Pratincole colonies at seasonal pools, groups of Red-footed Falcons, Pallid and Montagu's Harriers hunt the steppe, and Blyth's Reed Warblers and Thrush Nightingales sing from the scrubbier areas. There is still so much left to discover; we came away feeling as if we'd seen just the tip of the iceberg. No doubt future trips will yield further finds.

A fortnight exploring Russia's Ural Mountains ranks as the most exciting birding trip I've ever done. This phenomenally diverse mountain chain offers a unique opportunity to connect with a long list of amazing birds within Europe's boundaries. Even Yekaterinburg, Russia's fourth-largest city, offers brilliant birding– it's possible to see Long-tailed Rosefinch, Azure Tit, Oriental Turtle Dove and a host of other Siberian species amid beautiful marshes a stone's throw from the airport. Birding on the Western Palearctic's eastern frontier cannot be recommended highly enough. ■

JOSH JONES

This male Red-headed Bunting gave exceptional views, perched just 20 m distant. The species was one of four main targets in the Orenburg region.

RUSSIA

Visiting

- A visa is required to enter the country; it's best to apply as far as possible in advance. See **www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/russia** for further information.
- Several airlines fly from London Heathrow to Yekaterinburg Koltsovo International, including Aeroflot, Siberia Airlines, Alitalia, Air France and KLM.
- Visit Russia, the Russian national tourist office: **www.visitrussia.org.uk**.

Further reading

- *Where to Watch Birds in Europe and Russia* by Nigel Wheatley (Bloomsbury, 2000); please note this is no longer in print, but is available second hand.

Online resources

- A checklist of birds recorded in Russia: **www.birdlist.org/russia.htm**

JOSH JONES

Very little information exists on birding the Orenburg region, despite the area being rich in birdlife and home to several species found nowhere else in Europe.

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: HARLEQUIN DUCK BY MARC GUYT (WWW.AGAMI.NL), BRÜNNICH'S GUILLEMOT AND THE *PLANCIUS* BOTH BY LAURENS STEIJN

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Other possible seabirds include Great, Pomarine, Arctic and Long-tailed Skuas, Sabine's Gull and Leach's Storm-petrel, and we'll keep a look out for shearwaters and anything unusual among the many other commoner seabirds. Several different species of whale and dolphin are also possible, as are passerine migrants which may take the opportunity to rest on board our ship. At night, if conditions are right, the *aurora borealis* (or Northern Lights) may illuminate the darkness with an ethereal green glow.

In a little over three days we'll have passed the scenic Faroe Islands and be well on the way to the legendary Fair Isle. Here, at the southernmost point of the Shetland Isles, we will land on day four and spend the entire day scouring the island for migrants. At this time of the year Fair Isle is arguably at its finest, and rare migrants and vagrants are not uncommon. On a good day there is chance of scarcities such as Yellow-browed Warbler, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Common Rosefinch and Red-backed Shrike. We can hope for even better birds such as Lanceolated Warbler and Pechora Pipit. The seas that surround Fair Isle also offer good cetacean-watching opportunities.

We'll then sail south over the next two days through the North Sea, keeping an eye out en route for birds such as Red-throated Diver, Leach's Storm-petrel, Sooty and Manx Shearwaters and Arctic, Pomarine and Long-tailed Skuas, as well as the passerines and raptors that are sometimes lost at sea during this key migration time. On day seven our journey finally comes to an end in the Dutch port of Vlissingen.

Iceland pre-tour

Arriving at Reykjavik, we will enjoy the landscape of lava fields and birds, with a brief visit to the famous Blue Lagoon. We will then drive from the capital to Akureyri, stopping along the way to observe birds and the remarkable landscape of Iceland with its waterfalls and geysers

As we head north-east, we will stop at known hot-spots to search for Harlequin Duck, Ptarmigan, White-tailed Eagle and various waders and gulls, as well as Arctic Fox. We may also encounter unexpected species at this time of migration.

We'll spend a day at Lake Mývatn, about 40 miles east of Akureyri. One of Iceland's largest lakes, it is famous for Barrow's Goldeneye and Harlequin Duck, both of which breed in Iceland but nowhere else in Europe. The surrounding area is also good for Gyr Falcon, and this will be another of our key targets.

On the morning of the final day, there will still be time to look for any missed species. We'll then leave for the harbour in Akureyri, where we board our ship and start our new adventure on the *Plancius*.

This tour is operated for Birdwatch by Birding Breaks (registered with the Chamber of Commerce in Amsterdam under licence number 54226104). The price includes all accommodation and food on board ship on a full-board basis, as well as expert guiding. For further information, reservations and full details of the Iceland pre-tour and what's not included, please call the company on 0031 20 77 92 030 or email info@birdingbreaks.nl.

GYR FALCON BY LAURENS STEIJN

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Spanish bird fiesta!

With its mix of habitats and wide range of bird species, the Ebro Delta is a fantastic destination for birders, especially during autumn migration. A new birdfair will make the most of the area at this special time of year.

The Ebro Delta is the largest wetland in Catalonia. Since 1986, almost 8,000 ha have been protected to preserve the region's extraordinarily rich wildlife. More than 340 species have been recorded in this amazing mix of habitats.

It is a fantastic area to see a large number of bird species in a short time, but it's the region's specialities that really appeal to birders. The super-abundant Audouin's Gull is probably the most famous species, but other gulls and terns such as Slender-billed Gull and Gull-billed Tern can also be found.

Squacco Herons frequent many of the small canals between the rice fields, and Little Bitterns are easy to find in the reedbeds around the main lagoons. Purple Swamphens are abundant in many parts of the Delta and Glossy Ibises gather in large flocks, which fly in daily from roosting areas to their feeding haunts. Collared Pratincole is a relatively easy target in late spring and summer.

Desirable passerines are also plentiful: Savi's Warbler nests in the area, while Moustached Warbler can be found in winter. The Ebro Delta is one of the few breeding areas in Western Europe for Lesser Short-toed Lark.

September is an excellent time for birders to visit the Ebro Delta, as this is when rarities appear. Pallid Harrier, Pacific Golden Plover, Spotted and Pectoral Sandpipers and Citrine Wagtail were all recorded during the weekend of last year's Delta Birding Festival.

PHOTOS: MARIANO CEBOLLA BORRELL

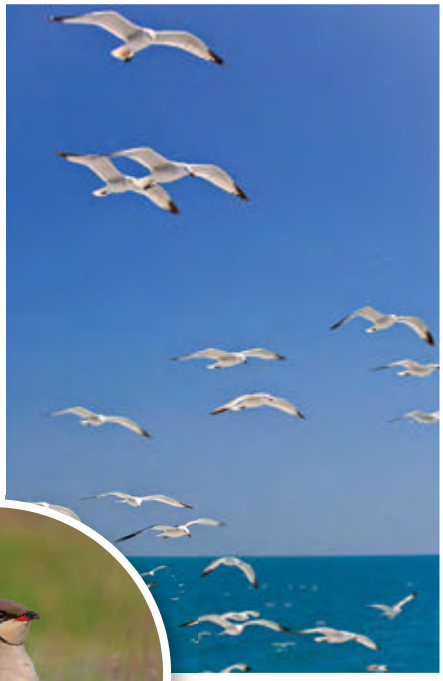
Delta birding

Now in its second year, the Delta Birding Festival offers a comprehensive programme of activities including talks, courses, workshops and contests. A large variety of optics companies, book publishers and other products and services for birders have stands at the fair, which is attended by many dedicated naturalists and nature enthusiasts.

The festival is dedicated to raising money for bird conservation, following the very successful example of Birdfair in Rutland. In 2014, €4,000 was donated to a scientific ringing project and census work of waterfowl in the Alfacada reserve in the Ebro Delta, and for the monitoring of birdlife in an area of abandoned rice fields that will be transformed into wetlands.

Some prestigious ornithologists have been invited to give talks in the 2015 fair. Leading lights from around the world such as Hadoram Shirihai, Dick Forsman, Markus Varesvuo and Martin Garner, and Dani Lopez Velasco, Jose Luis Copete, Javier de la Puente and Juan Varela from Catalonia and Spain are all on the packed programme.

There will also be the opportunity to visit the access-restricted Alfacada lagoon, the best-guarded secret of the Ebro Delta, and to join an offshore boat trip to observe seabirds, especially Balearic and Mediterranean Shearwaters, as well as Audouin's Gulls, terns, skuas and more. The festival will also offer digiscoping workshops, free bird tours around the adjacent lagoons of La Tancada and the Salines and a bird identification contest, among many more activities.



ORYX, a shop specialising in birding optics, equipment and natural history books, is the main promoter of the Delta Birding Festival. It has teamed up with the Catalan Ornithological Institute (ICO) and the Fundació Catalunya – La Pedrera (FCLP) for the event; the former is the main Catalan birding organisation with around 5,000 members and the latter is an active land trust that manages many endangered habitats for conservation.

The Direcció General del Medi Natural of the Catalan Government is the main fund provider of the event and both "Terres de l'Ebre" of the Tarragona Provincial Government Tourist Board and the Amposta City Council support the event. ■

- **The festival will begin on Friday 18 September and finish on Sunday 20 September. See www.deltabirdingfestival.com for further information.**

The Delta Birding Festival takes place at Spain's bird-rich Ebro Delta (left), where such species as Greater Flamingo, Audouin's Gull (above) and Collared Pratincole (inset) are numerous.

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10x42 - Green	£69.95	**£64.99**
10x42 - Camo	£69.95	**£64.99**

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	RRP	NOW
8x32	£99.95	**£89.99**
10x32	£109.95	**£99.99**
8x42	£119.95	**£104.99**
10x42	£129.95	**£109.99**
10x50	£134.95	**£116.99**
12x50	£139.95	**£121.99**

HAWKE SPORT OPTICS Frontier ED Open Hinge Binoculars

NEW

	RRP	NOW
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Lowepro OPTICS SERIES

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Weight gains

Helios's top-of-the-range scope is a durable heavyweight that is not light on performance, as *Mike Alibone* discovered when he took it out in the field.

REVIEW

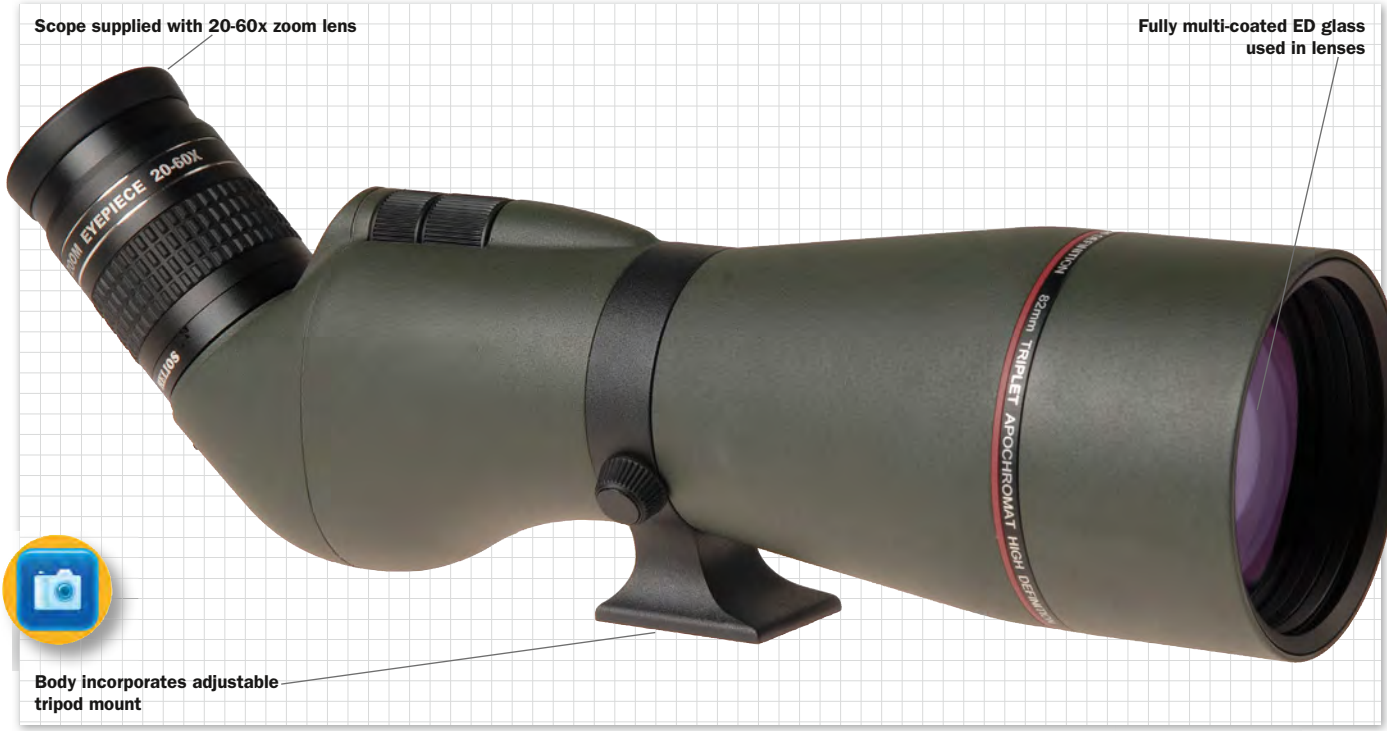
Helios Fieldmaster ED82DS Triplet 20-60x82 telescope

CURRENTLY well established in the optics market, the Fieldmaster ED82DS occupies pole position in the Helios telescope range. This substantially chunky instrument is perhaps slipping under the radar when the search is on for a new telescope which offers a high level of performance without associated high costs.

It's a robust piece of equipment, with a magnesium alloy body, which is less reliant on rubber armour for protection. The large 82 mm objective is adequately recessed and further protected by a strong, solid and smoothly sliding lens hood. The body incorporates an adjustable tripod mount which rotates through approximately 225 degrees of the body's circumference, click-stopping in six positions. Although the body is magnesium, the scope weighs just under 2 kg and feels a little heavy.

The dual focusing system is mounted centrally on the body above the prism housing, into which it is partly recessed. Both focusing wheels are finely milled and of the same diameter, with the 20 mm length of the distal wheel controlling the fast focus and the shorter, 15 mm, one used for fine tuning.

This system works very well in delivering a sharp image, but I did have some problems in its initial use. These arose primarily from the compact size of the wheels combined with their



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June is the ideal month for photographing breeding seabirds, so Steve Young wants to see your best auk images.

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Swarovski Optik's prestigious competition opens this month – find out how to enter.

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Steve Young puts Nikon's latest superzoom camera, the Coolpix P900, to the test.

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A fascinating and lyrical study of wildlife in a Highland glen over a 12-month period.

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Comprehensive new bird atlases for Somerset and Northumberland.

THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL

DOMINIC MITCHELL is *Birdwatch*'s founder and Managing Editor. He has been birding in Britain and abroad for more than 40 years.

STEVE YOUNG is Photographic Consultant for *Birdwatch* and an award-winning wildlife photographer.

MIKE ALIBONE is *Birdwatch*'s Optics Editor. He has been testing binoculars and telescopes for more than a decade.

ALAN TILMOUTH is a Northumberland-based birder who has had a passion for wildlife since childhood.

DAVID CALLAHAN Prior to joining *Birdwatch*, David trained as a taxonomist at the Natural History Museum.

JAMES PACKER is a principal ecology consultant for ADAS UK Ltd, and a keen Somerset birder and photographer.

Did you know?

DUAL-focusing wheels are now commonly used in telescope design. Mounted in tandem on the body, each may vary in both depth and diameter, with one controlling fast 'distance' focusing, while the other allows precision adjustments to be made for final image sharpening.

partial embedding within the body. This minimises the surface area in contact with your fingers, making finding and differentiating between the two wheels tricky until you become familiar with their relative positions. I also found the main wheel a little stiff and 'lumpy' in its rotation, but the fine-tuning wheel turned very smoothly and produced a clean, sharp focus, even at the top of the magnification range.

The scope comes with a 20-60x zoom eyepiece which is securely bayonet fitted; this is locked and released using a small catch directly below the mounting. Its removal serves purely for transportation as there are no other compatible eyepieces. The deep, stippled, centrally positioned band provides plenty of grip and it turns very smoothly and evenly throughout the full range of magnification, while the rubber-covered eyecup extends out by approximately 13 mm. I was not able to see the full field of view when it was fully extended, but the 39-20 m at 1,000 m is a very respectable field range for this telescope's specification and compares favourably with more expensive models.

The image quality is also very high, a significant contribution to which comes from the triplet objective lens – effectively an apochromatic optical system which is designed for the purpose of significantly reducing chromatic aberration within the image. It works – the image is very sharp practically across the entire field, with negligible 'hairline' softening only at the extreme edge, and it's also bright with rich, deep colours and a pleasing degree of contrast. Chromatic aberration is low but still detectable with some scrutiny. The quality of the image is no doubt buoyed by the inclusion of ED glass and fully multi-coated glass elements.

There is an awful lot of telescope on offer here, providing an attractive package for less than £800, and representing very good value against some more highly priced models. A simple but effective stay-on case is included in the package. Look out for further additions to the Helios range in the very near future. ■

Further info

- **Price:** £799
- **Size:** 390x126 mm (including eyepiece)
- **Weight:** 1,885 g
- **Magnification:** 20-60x
- **Field of view:** 39-20 m at 1,000 m
- **Light transmission:** 82 per cent
- **Close focus:** 13 m
- **Gas-filled:** yes
- **Waterproof:** yes
- **Guarantee:** 1 year

Verdict

- ✅ Image quality is high: sharp with good contrast and colours
- ✅ Chromatic aberration is low across the field
- ❌ Dual-focusing system somewhat difficult to use
- ❌ No choice of eyepieces

Barrier method works

REVIEW

HayMax Organic Drug-free Allergen Barrier Balm

IT is the misfortune of birding hayfever sufferers that peak pollen season tends to coincide with some of the best birding times of the year, particularly late spring and early autumn migration periods.

HayMax is a new allergen barrier balm which claims to reduce the amounts of pollen inhaled by a third and to help eight out of 10 users. It claims to be drug-free, with no drowsy side effects, is easy to use and asserts that it is proven to work. So does it?

I used the product this spring, and can report that it certainly does appear to work to a degree. It is applied by a small quantity being placed on the fingertip and smeared inside each nostril, and can last most of the day unless you blow your nose – in which case, reapplication is quick. The small amounts used mean that the fairly tiny pots last longer than might be expected, too. My symptoms didn't entirely disappear, but there was a marked decrease in sneezing.

Researchers at the University of Worcester agreed that the balm acted as an efficient pollen trap in trials, but there appear to have been no comparative studies with similar brands or Vaseline, so any advantage over more familiar methods is reliant on anecdote. However, while the benefits of organic sourcing of raw materials are debatable, the company assures customers that it buys locally, uses Fair Trade beeswax, thus cutting its carbon footprint, and also recycles and trades ethically – advantages over some brands. Unfortunately, it also advises homeopathy, aromatherapy, acupuncture and acupressure to ease symptoms, which makes one doubt the efficacy of some of the claims.

Available in 5 ml plastic pots in four scents – lavender, frankincense, aloe vera and pure – at a basic level, this product appears to provide an efficient but partial pollen barrier, enabling a hay fever sufferer to go about their daily tasks with reduced inconvenience. Its main claims seem to be true, and it also appears to work – for which I was grateful. ***David Callahan***

MORE INFO **RRP:** £6.99 • **Size:** 5 ml • **From:** HayMax • www.haymax.biz

STEVE YOUNG'S PHOTO CHALLENGE

Auks

IT'S that time of year when the seabird colonies are noisy, smelly and very exciting! So get your camera and lens and head to the nearest cliff-top breeding sites, because this month I want to see your best auk images. I'm excluding Puffin from this challenge as that species will have one of its own again sometime in the future.

So, Common and Black Guillemots and Razorbill are the species I'm looking for. It could be your best shot of a flying bird, one with a bill full of fish, a pair at a nesting ledge, a cliff-side full of activity as birds come and go, or just a nice portrait of a single bird, maybe with a sunset behind it.

Who knows what the *Birdwatch* photographers will come up with for this challenge? But I'm sure something special will win this month's prize of a copy of *RSPB Seabirds* by Marianne Taylor. Email your best candidates to editorial@birdwatch.co.uk by 24 June – good luck!

• **Turn to page 93 to find out who won April's challenge, Woodpigeon.**

COMPETITION

Digiscoper of the Year 2015

WITH a little practice, anyone can take stunning images by digiscoping, so why not enter yours in Swarovski's Digiscoper of the Year 2015?

There are four categories: Behaviour and Action, Portrait, Mammals, and Video. Images and footage can be submitted from 1 June to 30 September. Last year's winner (above) was a video by Jürgen Bergmann showing Peregrine Falcon among other species.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the competition, so the optics manufacturer is putting together a special package of prizes. The 20 winners will once again be selected by an international jury which includes *Birdwatch* Managing Editor Dominic Mitchell. The final results will be revealed in November.

When: 1 June-30 September. **Further information:** visit www.digiscoperoftheyear.com. ■

Above: there is usually plenty of activity on seabird cliff ledges including the occasional dispute as with these Common Guillemots, one of which is the bridled form.

Below: standard portraits of Razorbill are always nice, but to be in with a better chance of winning try for something slightly different – and harder! – like a calling bird.

PHOTOS: STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

Close-up cool

REVIEW

Nikon Coolpix P900 camera

IF you have an interest in bird photography and want more than a smaller compact camera can offer, but don't want to have to carry a heavy DSLR and telephoto lens, then the new Coolpix P900 from Nikon could be exactly what you are looking for.

This 16 MP camera has a zoom range from 4.3-357 mm, the equivalent of 24-2,000 mm on a DSLR. It is lightweight and has vibration reduction (VR) that claims to increase hand-holding ability by 5 stops. ED glass elements help to reduce chromatic aberration, while the maximum aperture of f6.5 allows for a bright image even when zoomed to maximum. A built-in flash and eyepiece dioptre adjustment button are also among the features of this specification-packed model.

To fully test the product, I first used it in the garden as a 'point-and-shoot' camera and then on more distant subjects at my local reserve.

I'm used to DSLRs, so even though the Coolpix has a viewfinder, I still found it totally different. It didn't take me long to get used to it, though, and there were certain things that I liked better; for example, the angled viewing screen made shooting low-level images easier on the neck. I didn't have to contort my neck to use the viewfinder, instead just twisting the screen upwards, and used that to focus on my garden birds.

The menu is easy to use, with adjustments to settings simple to make. There are numerous exposure meter choices, including full manual control for us old-fashioned snappers who like to be in complete control.

At my local reserve I used the zoom to its full extent, first taking a scenic at the wide-angle setting and then zooming in to focus on a wing-drying Cormorant at about 90 m range. A distant Fox across the pool was brought into sharp relief as I focused in on it, and then pulled back to photograph a Great Crested Grebe diving in front of the hide.

The zoom is quick and easy to use, either via a lever on the shutter button or a control on the side of the lens. The lens zoom button can also be used for manual focus if needed – just go into the menu and change the preferences. The shutter zoom button doubles as the magnifying button when viewing images.

Close focusing is amazing, with a macro facility down to 1 cm; the main problem at this range is trying to keep the subject out of the shadow of the lens! Although I did hand-hold on a number of occasions, most of the time I used a beanbag for support when I had the zoom to maximum. The VR is very good, but to hand-hold a 2,000 mm lens in poor light is asking a lot.

Reviewing the images at home, I was impressed. Although the pixel formation seems to be very different to that of a DSLR, the quality was still very good. Colours, contrast and noise were all excellent and, although at the extreme range of the extended zoom quality did suffer, images at around the 1,000-1,500 mm range were excellent. I was particularly pleased with a grab shot of the distant Fox running along the edge of the reserve pool.

This is a very nice piece of kit. It is easy to carry around, produces very good results and if you have been waiting to upgrade your compact or old bridge camera to something more powerful, this should be on your shortlist. ***Steve Young***

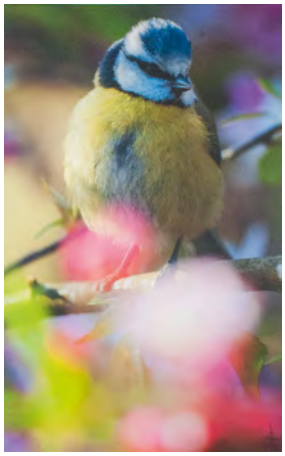
This shot was taken from a hide window on my local patch at the wide-angle end of the zoom. The Cormorant can just be seen in the centre of the frame. The same bird was photographed with the lens zoomed to 1,500 mm (below).

PHOTOS: STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

More info **Price:** £499 • **Focal length:** 4.3-357 mm • **Sensor:** 16 MP • **Dimensions:** 139.5x103.2x137.4 mm • **Weight:** 899 g

EVENT OF THE MONTH

Watching Spring photography exhibition



BLUE TIT IN THE NEW FOREST 2012 BY CHRIS PACKHAM

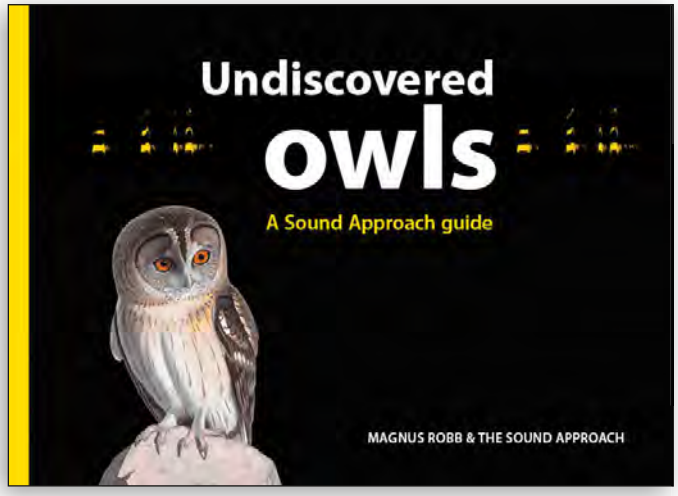
PHOTOGRAPHS by Chris Packham will be a special feature of Watching Spring, a photography exhibition at the World Land Trust Art Gallery in Halesworth, Suffolk. The exhibition will run in parallel with BBC2's *Springwatch*, which returns to Minsmere RSPB on the Suffolk coast for a second year in May.

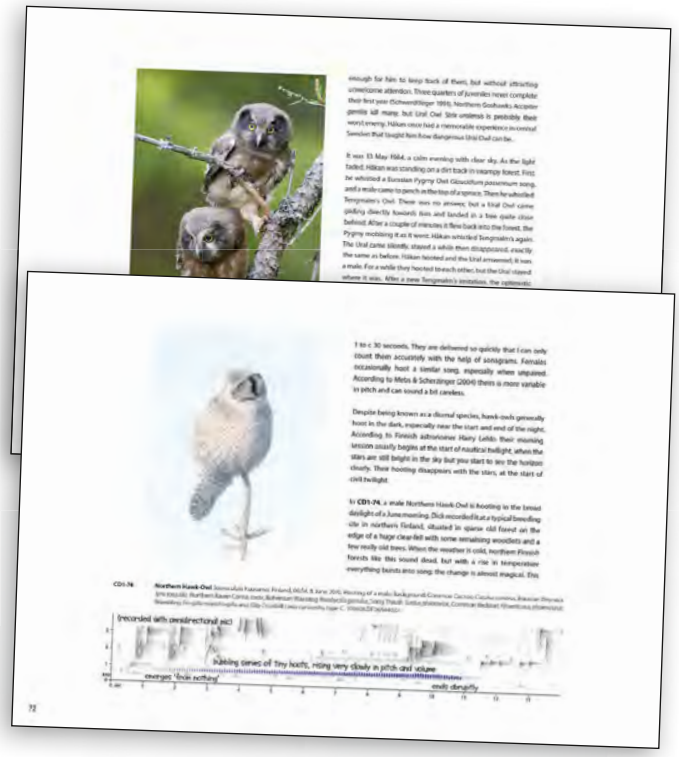
Chris, who is a WLT patron, said: "I'm delighted that this exhibition is happening at World Land Trust Art Gallery during the next series of *Springwatch*, when public attention will be focused on RSPB Minsmere and wildlife local to the reserve."

Watching Spring will also feature original artwork by Dan Bradbury, Kate and Hannah Breach, Steve Cale, Robert Greenhalf, Amie Haslen, Sara Johnson, Andrew Pitt and photographer David Tipling. Much of the work on show has been produced specifically for this exhibition. All works are for sale.

When: 7 May-20 June. **Where:** WLT Art Gallery, Halesworth, Suffolk IP19 9JU. **Further information:** call 01986 874422 or visit www.worldlandtrust.org/gallery. ■

The night shift





THERE can't be many birders who don't look forward to a new book from The Sound Approach well in advance of its actual publication. The series is renowned for high production values, cutting-edge taxonomy and esoteric information, as well as its promotion of new or obscure forms of Western Palearctic birds, some of which may be serious propositions as good species.

The discovery of an apparent new species of *Strix* owl in Arabia last year, subsequently named Omani Owl, has created even more anticipation for this volume. Taxonomists have been aware that our zoogeographical region is likely to contain several cryptic and potentially splittable forms of owl, and The Sound Approach's 'hands-on' ability to independently research these possibilities has meant that knowledge has increased at a faster rate than it could on ever-tightening academic budgets.

Each volume revolves around original field recordings, and the differences that can be heard between discrete bird populations, subspecies and species, encapsulated in The Sound Approach's slogan 'Understanding bird sound'. The high-quality and atmospheric recordings are made in the field by lead author Magnus Robb and others, mainly on expeditions set up specifically to collect these sound samples in carefully selected locations.

The interlinking text and recordings mean that *Undiscovered Owls* is a personally engaging and interactive experience. Consecutively numbered recordings on the four CDs are continually referred to and meant to be listened to as you read. Adjacent to these are annotated sonograms of each recording, enabling details of the sound to be 'read' and become more apparent. This now-familiar method was a pioneering innovation in the very first Sound Approach book and has been a defining feature since, but it really does work with practice – you hear the nuances and fluctuations of each hoot and shriek more clearly under visual instruction, and appreciate the authors' subtle evaluations.

But the headline purpose of the book for most will be the 'undiscovered' forms they didn't know about before, or further confirmation of those they may have suspected. So, let's do the splits.

The first chapter on the barn owl genus *Tyto* declares three new island endemics "for the sake of argument": Slender-billed Barn Owl on the eastern Canary Islands, plus the eponymous Madeira and Cape Verde Barn Owls. Immediately we can see some of the fascinations and difficulties behind The Sound Approach's methods.

Without a confirmatory molecular study, the differences in physical proportions and minor plumage and call divergences could perhaps be the result of a 'founder effect' – features derived from a skewed gene sample provided by a small number of original colonists – or Foster's rule, where island populations change in size and proportions. While the authors briefly discuss the lack of genetic studies, some might argue it would be more taxonomically valid to keep these forms as subspecies pending further research. Turkish Fish Owl is split from Brown on the basis of its calls and a 2 per cent DNA disparity, but based on limited samples (though this is hardly surprising given its near-mythical status until recently).

That's not to say that the authors aren't correct on all these points, of course, and it is riveting seeing the discovery of the different forms unfolding through a mix of travel book, expedition log and detective story.

Further splits suggested are a strongly presented one between Little Owl (western Europe and Iberia) and 'Cucumiau' (North Africa, eastern Mediterranean and across the rest of Eurasia), which many birders won't have suspected before (see last issue, pages 62-67), as well as that of Cyprus Scops Owl from Eurasian. Due to the book's coverage of the entire Arabian peninsula, Arabian Scops Owl (split from African Scops Owl) also gets a chapter. Arabian Eagle Owl (split from Spotted Eagle Owl) gets its own account, too, while Pharaoh Eagle Owl remains separate from Eurasian, and 'Lapland Owl' is split from the North American Great Grey Owl. The recent conflation of two Ural Owl subspecies in Europe seems further confirmed by the recordings in the book.

The fragmentation of Tawny Owl continues apace with a chapter on Maghreb Wood Owl, which has a deeper call and darker plumage than Tawny, and was in fact viewed as a good species a century ago. The recent controversy over Hume's and Omani Owls is addressed in the book as an addendum. The team stick to their guns in retaining Omani as a new species, but reserve judgement on the published revelation that the type specimen of Hume's was also a different species that may correspond to Omani, and which was also given a new scientific name by other authors (see *Birdwatch* 272: 82). Pragmatically, they leave a full conclusion open to further research.

This is a sumptuous and eye-opening read, as well as an authoritative reference for years to come. The joy of discovery and the pains of detailed hard work are profuse throughout, and the book remains an engrossing read due to Robb's pleasingly conversational style. It will also give adventurous birders plenty of scope to plan trips to see – and hear – these mysterious and hard-won species for themselves.

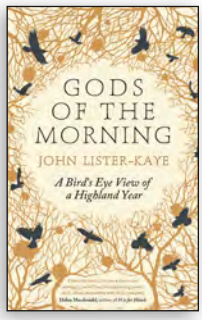
David Callahan

More info

- *Undiscovered Owls* by Magnus Robb and the Sound Approach (The Sound Approach, Poole, 2015).
- 308 pages, numerous colour illustrations, photos and distribution maps, 4 CDs.
- ISBN 9789081093378. Hbk, £39.95.

Birdwatch Bookshop from £34.95

A wildlife year



IN 1976 John Lister-Kaye bought an old Georgian house that was on the verge of demolition. He transformed Aigas into a family home and the Highlands' first field studies centre. Over four decades, he has come to know the wildlife of the Highland glens.

Gods of the Morning recounts a year in the life of Aigas's wildlife. Lister-Kaye starts his story in October rather than January, explaining that mid-winter is a dead time for wildlife, unlike autumn which is a time of transition and movement, when the countryside is awash with colour.

The book begins with nesting birds heading south for warmer climes and winter visitors returning from their Arctic breeding grounds. The calls of the incoming Pink-footed Geese mark the turning of the year for the author. We end in September, when Lister-Kaye takes his grandson Arthur to find a Treecreeper, which results in an interesting rumination on the species' roosting behaviour.

This is much more than a simple diary charting the comings and goings at Aigas, though. Lister-Kaye uses his observations as a springboard to a wide range of topics, some general and others highly personal. He talks about everything from bird migration and climate change – was this phenomenon to blame for a terrifying bush fire that raged through the glen in March? – to the dogs he's owned over the years and his love for the Rooks that breed at Aigas.

Birds feature most prominently. The author describes in vivid detail his encounters with a female Blackcap on the nest and a male Merlin surveying the glen at dawn. But it's not all about the birds. We also read about migrating money spiders, the author's Jack Russells, Roe Deer, how Pine Martens have returned to the Highlands and much more.

Over the years Lister-Kaye has come to know the habits of the Highland glen's wildlife intimately and this shows in his writing. This is a lyrical, even beautiful, exploration of Highlands wildlife. It also serves as a reminder of how cut off from nature so many of us are these day, and hopefully an inspiration to us all to reconnect with the natural environment.

Rebecca Armstrong

More info

- *Gods of the Morning: a Bird's Eye View of a Highland Year* by John Lister-Kaye (Canongate, Edinburgh, 2015).
- 304 pages.
- ISBN 9781782114154. Hbk, £14.99.

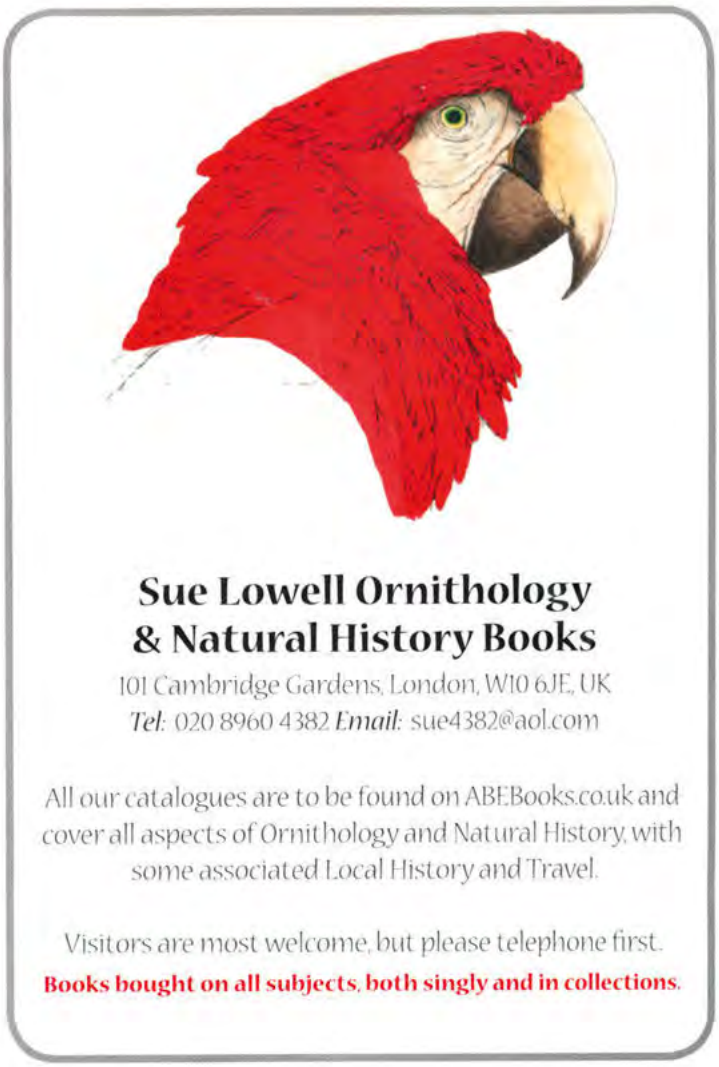
BOOK NEWS

■ *Meadowland* wins prize

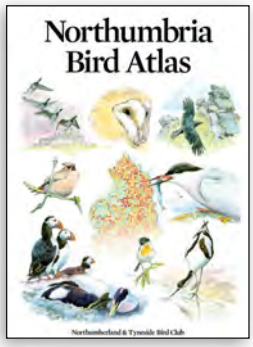
FARMER and writer John Lewis-Stempel has been awarded the Thwaites Wainwright Prize 2015 for his book *Meadowland: the Private Life of an English Field* – a lyrical account of a year in the life of a farmland meadow.

Worth £5,000, the annual book prize is awarded by publisher Frances Lincoln, in association with the National Trust, to highlight the best books in British nature and travel writing. *Meadowland* gives a unique and intimate account of a Herefordshire farm meadow from January to December, recording the passage of the seasons from cowslips in spring to the hay-cutting of summer and grazing in autumn.

A special commendation for a lifetime of nature writing was given to the late Professor Oliver Rackham. ■



Northern lights



IT was back in 2006 that plans began to combine work on the BTO *Bird Atlas 2007-11* with a new breeding and winter atlas for the county. Nine years on, and with more than 10,000 hours of fieldwork, the *Northumbria Bird Atlas* has finally been published.

It is a fitting end product to the efforts made by volunteers in the field and the small team from the Northumberland and Tyneside Bird Club who have devoted many hours to analysing the data and writing species accounts. Every single tetrad in the region was surveyed, producing 375,000 records. More than 700 observers contributed records to this fine work.

With the exception of one species (the secretive Common Quail), every image in the *Atlas* was taken in Northumberland and the image quality is generally good. The species accounts are well written and provide some great background and interpretation of the data.

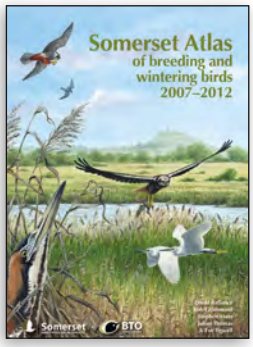
Updating the status of 200 species, the *Atlas* reveals some startling changes in Northumberland's birdlife since the previous publication. Very welcome is the 2,155 per cent increase in breeding Common Buzzards and a remarkable 4,125 per cent increase in the breeding population of Ravens. Perhaps more surprising when viewed against a national decline is the 144 per cent increase in Garden Warblers. Not all results are positive, though, and an almost total collapse of the breeding Corn Bunting population (down by 92 per cent) paints a sad picture of a once common farmland bird. Despite gaining Avocet as a breeding species, declines in breeding waders such as Eurasian Curlew and Dunlin are highlighted.

The *Northumbria Bird Atlas* is a fine effort that will provide everyone interested in the birds of north-east England with an unmatched guide to their populations, distributions and changes in recent years. ***Alan Tilmouth***

More info

- *The Northumbria Bird Atlas* (Northumberland and Tyneside Bird Club, Newcastle, 2015).
- 512 pages, numerous colour illustrations, photos and maps.
- ISBN 9780955740664. Pbk, £25 + p&p (available from ntbcorg@gmail.com).

Southern herons



SOMERSET is becoming increasingly well known among birders for the success of wetland species in the Avalon Marshes complex (see pages 25-27), and a typical scene by Mike Langman adorns the front cover of the *Somerset Atlas of Breeding and Wintering Birds 2007-2012*.

Flip the book over, though, and you are greeted by a much less familiar image of Somerset birdlife – an upland oak woodland and heather moorland with associated Common Redstart, Pied Flycatcher and Wood Warbler. This is where the surprises begin; delve deeper into the atlas and the uninitiated will certainly discover many unexpected species accounts.

This is the first county atlas to be produced by the Somerset Ornithological Society, combining an account of breeding and wintering species for a five-year period. It uses data collected for the BTO *Bird Atlas 2007-11*.

A foreword and introduction by Simon King and Stephen Moss respectively are followed by descriptions of the habitats found within the county. References to Victorian novelists and poets aside, this section presents a comprehensive and useful context in which to place the maps in the main section of the book.

The maps and species accounts are the meat of the atlas. The reader will discover a surprisingly wide diversity of breeding and wintering species; however, some maps appear surprisingly blank. The distributions of Willow Tit and Corn Bunting show that wintering Yellow-browed Warblers are now more widespread in Somerset than these two species added together.

The *Somerset Atlas* is a truly outstanding achievement by a small group of authors and a huge team of observers. The book is a pleasure to read, beautifully presented, and will remain invaluable benchmark for years to come. ***James Packer***

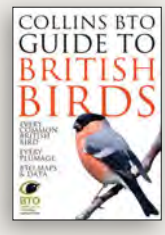
More info

- *Somerset Atlas of Breeding and Wintering Birds 2007-2012* by David Ballance, Rob Grimmond, Stephen Moss, Julian Thomas and Eve Tigwell (Somerset Ornithological Society, 2014, Chard).
- 336 pages, numerous colour illustrations and photos.
- ISBN 9780993120503. Hbk, £35 + £4.95 p&p (available from robert.grimmond@somersetbirds.net).

BOOKSHELF

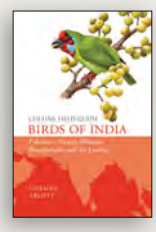
Collins has published a selection of field guides to birds from around the world. *Heather O'Connor* provides a round-up of these new titles.

DUE for release this month is a new and unique collaboration between the British Trust for Ornithology and publishing house Collins. Our Book of the Month, ***Collins BTO Guide to British Birds***, brings together the most authoritative and up-to-date information from the BTO's *Bird Atlas 2007-11* to produce a new field guide to the common birds of Britain and Ireland. Described as a 'book for all birders', it is written and illustrated very much with all levels of birder in mind, with an emphasis on illustrating key features needed to identify familiar birds with confidence, especially confusion species.



This new title is to be followed by a companion volume due for release in autumn: ***Collins BTO Guide to Rare British Birds*** will include all the rare and scarce birds that have occurred in Britain and Ireland up to February this year. Together, these two volumes will produce a comprehensive reference covering every species of wild bird that has ever occurred in Britain.

Other new titles from Collins to look out for this month include ***Field Guide to the Birds of South America – Passerines*** (the companion to the publisher's previously released non-passerines title), plus the comprehensive ***Field Guide to the Birds of India*** which covers the vast area of South Asia including Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Andaman Islands, the Nicobar Islands and the Maldives.



You can discover more about these new field guides, as well as browse hundreds of other available titles, online at **www.birdwatch.co.uk/store**. ■

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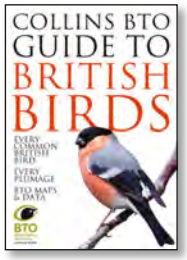
Book of the month



Collins BTO Guide to British Birds

Paul Sterry and Paul Stancliffe

£19.99 **ONLY £18.99**

SUBSCRIBER PRICE £17.99

(+ £5 p&p Europe, £6 ROW)

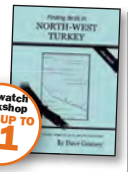
Offer ends 31 August

Published 4 June 2015

Birdwatch Bookshop SAVE UP TO £2

THIS unique new identification guide features all the birds that occur regularly in Britain and Ireland, including all species that breed regularly in the region, plus those that winter or occur as common passage migrants. Written and illustrated as much with birders of all experience levels in mind, it is designed to be used in the field, with text and photographs describing and illustrating the key features needed to identify a bird with confidence, particularly when separating it from similar, or 'confusion', species. Descriptions of song and call provide useful aids to identification. The guide includes more than 1,200 photographs, and relative abundance maps are shown for every species.

Finding Birds in North-West Turkey



Dave Gosney

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This latest title from the Easybirder series covers the areas between Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, including the Marmara lakes around Bursa. Describing all the best sites in exceptional detail, including the author's trademark hand-drawn maps, this handy guide will help you locate all the top birding hot-spots.

Cuckoo: Cheating by Nature

Nick Davies

£16.99 **Only £15.99**

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Naturalist and scientist Nick Davies reveals how cuckoos trick their hosts into raising their young. Using shrewd detective skills and field experiments, the author discovers how this extraordinary yet manipulative species is constantly evolving to keep up with changes in its hosts to ensure survival.

Canary Islands: Vol 1 Fuerteventura and Lanzarote

Dirk Hilbers and Kees Woutersen

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This new Crossbill Guide contains all the information nature-watchers need to find the best sites for birding, finding wildflowers, dragonflies and butterflies, seeing marine life and discovering all the most remarkable landscapes.

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Based on the scripts of BBC Radio 4's beloved year-long series, and distilling two lifetimes' knowledge, insight and enthusiasm into its pages, the authors profile the changing lives of our favourite birds through the year.

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Magnus Robb and The Sound Approach

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This groundbreaking book focuses on the owls of the Western Palearctic, exploring the vocal ranges of 38 different forms including several new species, and with 327 digitally recorded sounds. *Read our review on page 74.*

Birding Frontiers Challenge Series: Autumn

Martin Garner

£14.99 **Only £13.99***

*** This title is exempt from free UK p&p (+ £2 p&p UK, £5.50 Europe, £8 ROW)**

Offer extended to 30 June

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First in a new series of titles presenting ideas at the cutting edge of identification discoveries, beginning with autumn. Each challenge is presented in an accessible manner, with accompanying photos and illustrations.

Collins Field Guide: Birds of South America – Passerines

Ber Van Perlo

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Offer ends 31 August

Published 18 June

Birdwatch Bookshop SAVE UP TO £4

This major new field guide covers all the passerines found in this bird-rich region, with all plumages for each species illustrated, including males, females and juveniles.

Best Birdwatching Sites in North Wales

Alan Davies and Owen Roberts

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SUBSCRIBER PRICE £15.95

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Offer ends 31 August

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This new and updated version features revisions to all the 58 major sites covered in the 2007 original, plus updated maps and directions, useful site information, target birds for each site and a full checklist.

Field Guide to the Invasive Plants and Animals of Britain

Olaf Booy, Max Wade and Helen Roy

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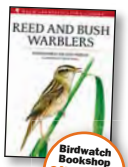
Birdwatch Bookshop SAVE UP TO £3

Enabling the identification of a range of introduced species in Britain, this book will act as both an ID guide and an

Reed and Bush Warblers



Peter Kennerley, David Pearson and Brian Small

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This authoritative handbook covers in breathtaking detail the identification of the genera *Acrocephalus*, *Locustella*, *Cettia* and *Bradypterus*, together with a few smaller related genera.

British Moths: a Photographic Guide to the Moths of Britain and Ireland

Chris Manley

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This fully updated second edition covers 871 macro-moths and 1,276 species of micro-moths in stunning colour photographs and concise and informative text.

Britain's Butterflies

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This fully updated third edition covers in detail all 59 butterfly species that breed regularly, as well as four former breeders, 10 rare migrants and one species of unknown status.

Collins Field Guide: Birds of India

Norman Arlott

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This comprehensive new field guide features every species of bird you might encounter in Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Andaman Islands, the Nicobar Islands and the Maldives.

RSPB Spotlight: Robins

Marianne Taylor

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ENTER NOW

To be in with a chance of winning this seven-night stay in a Cornish cottage go to **www.birdwatch.co.uk** and tell us what is the mystery bird pictured right.

Competition closes **30 June 2015**. Full terms and conditions can be found online at **www.birdwatch.co.uk**.

EXPERT ADVICE

THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL

CHRIS HARBARD After many years at the RSPB, Chris is now a tour leader, writer and editor, dividing his time between Britain and the USA.

DR CHARLOTTE K HEMELRIJK is a behavioural biologist at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands, studying swarming.

DAVID CALLAHAN Prior to joining *Birdwatch* as staff writer, David trained as a taxonomist at the Natural History Museum.

PETER JONES is a birder, author and tour guide who has led numerous trips to South America and around the world.

HEIN VAN GROUW is Curator of Birds at the Natural History Museum in Tring. He has a lifelong interest in colour mutations in birds.

MIKE LANGMAN is a full-time bird illustrator whose work has featured in numerous books, as well as at almost every RSPB reserve.

The best tips, advice and more
www.birdwatch.co.uk

www.birdwatch.co.uk BONUS ONLINE CONTENT

82 How to ... Learn which characters to concentrate on when sketching birds.

83 Food for thought Find out about birds' digestive systems and how different species eat.

84 Your questions answered Our panel of experts tackles more of your avian conundrums.

86 News Wildlife charities have joined forces to protect Europe's nature.

86 Listcheck New research shows that redpolls could be a single species, rather than three.

87 Fathers' day Read about the many chores required of male birds during the breeding season.

HOW TO ...

Keep a pan-species list

SUMMER can be slow for birding, with spring migration a distant memory, autumn passage still away in the future and breeding birds hiding themselves away. Now is a great time to start looking at wildlife other than birds. Pan-species listing, as it's known, is simple – try adding 10 new non-bird species every time you are out in the field. Here is some of the wildlife you could look for:

- **Insects:** dragonflies (57 species recorded in Britain) and butterflies (59 breeding species) are popular, but there aren't many species to see. Moths are better (around 2,500 species) and if you fancy a try at beetles (more than 4,000 species), you could start with ladybirds and progress from there. Flies have the lead with more than 7,000 species recorded in Britain.
- **Spiders:** there are some 650 species known in Britain and biggest lister has logged 493 of them.
- **Plants:** there are plenty of these to add to your lists, and it is easier to identify them in summer, when many are in flower. Get a good plant guide and get started – you can always photograph them and identify later. The top ranker has listed more than 2,000 species.
- **Lichens:** there are far fewer of these than plants, but according to British Lichens (**www.britishlichens.co.uk**) there are around 1,800 species in Britain; of these the top lister has recorded more than 1,200 species.
- **Fungi:** these are best looked for later in the year, and with some 15,000 known species in Britain there are plenty to forage for. The top lister has nearly 1,400 species.
- **Other invertebrates:** molluscs offer a good variety, with 203 on the top list, while the crustaceans have nearly 100 listed.

There are many more groups to look for. Britain's overall top pan-species lister has almost 12,000 species on his list. To see the rankings go to **www.brc.ac.uk/psl**.

All these groups have endangered species among them and require conservation. You can help improve our understanding of them by sharing your records:

- Plantlife: **www.plantlife.org.uk** (for plants and fungi).
- British Lichen Society: **www.britishlichensociety.org.uk** (for lichens).
- British Arachnological Society: **www.britishspiders.org.uk** (for spiders).
- British Dragonfly Society: **www.british-dragonflies.org**.uk (for dragonflies).
- Butterfly Conservation: **www.butterfly-conservation.org** (for butterflies and moths).
- Buglife: **www.buglife.org.uk** (for all invertebrates). ■

Marbled White is a distinctive black-and-white butterfly that is unlikely to be mistaken for any other species, so makes a good target for the beginner butterfly lister.

OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

HOW TO ...

Make great field sketches

PART 4

WHICH are the most important features to look for and include in your field sketches? This question can either be very easy or very difficult to answer, and largely depends on your own expertise. The simple answer is this: the diagnostic features that separate an individual bird from another species – but this can be complicated if you don't know which features are important to look for and note.

Sometimes little more than a shape might be enough – Hoopoe is a good example of this. In trickier species such as Greenish Warbler, subtle plumage features are more important.

Size, behaviour, calls and song can all be essential ingredients in making a positive identification, but these are difficult or impossible to sketch. If a bird calls or does something unusual, make a written note.

A sketch may give no indication of size, so remember to include a written description of how big the bird is. "It was tiny" or "enormous" is of little help; instead, try to compare the bird with something nearby; for example, "wingspan slightly wider than a Kittiwake" or "half the size of a redshank, standing just taller than a redshank's belly". These descriptions show thorough observation and consideration of size.

Putting calls into words is notoriously tricky, as the way we hear and then transcribe a call or song will vary from birder to birder. Was the call a sharp *tick* or hard *tack*, or perhaps the 'buzzy' *piszz* of a Tree Pipit or the harsh *jjeee* of a Brambling?

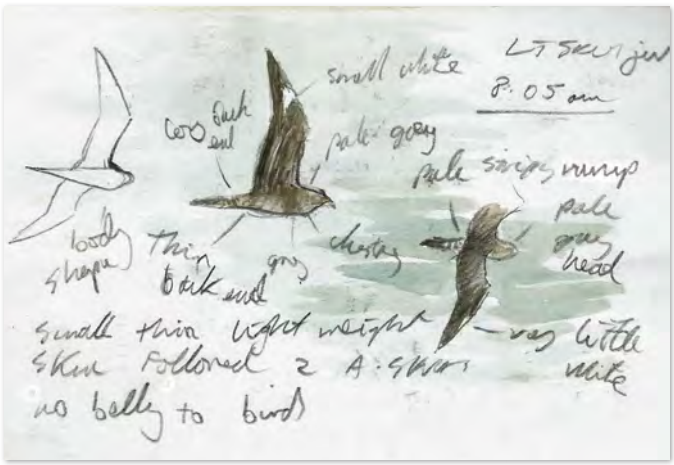
Getting back to the field sketch, on which areas should you concentrate? Usually it is the most striking features we look at first, perhaps an eyestripe or a supercilium, but don't forget the throat and crown. Perhaps it's the wing or tail that shows the most distinctive markings. The more that you know about a particular species or its close relatives, the easier it is to know which parts of the plumage to look at and sketch – it's often the case that more subtle features are more important.

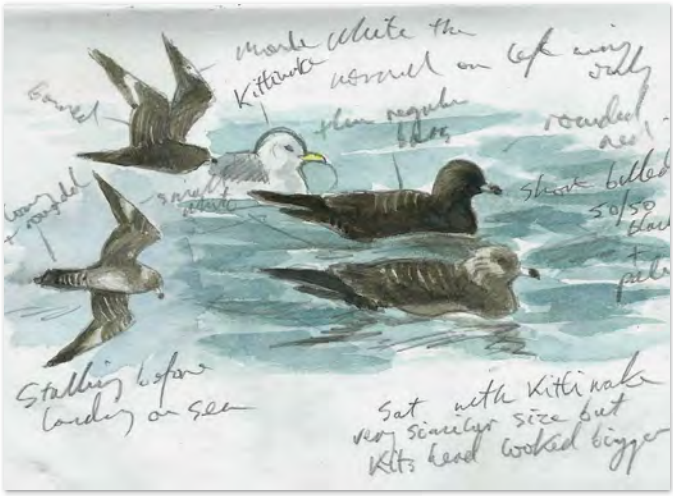
Wings have some of the most striking feather tracts on the whole of the bird's body, yet surprisingly many birders don't know the primary coverts from the greater coverts. Learning these basic areas of a bird's topography will speed up the construction of a sketch. It all helps to know that a pale line down the middle of the wing might be formed because the bird has pale tips to the greater coverts or that a block of black to the rear of the folded wing is because the edges on the bases of the secondaries are black.

Few of us will carry paints or crayons to add colour to our field sketches while out birding, so accurate written notes on colour and tone are very important. Colour can be added with watercolour or pencils on returning home. The sooner this is done the better, so that they are still fresh in the mind and the field notes are more meaningful. ■

ALL ILLUSTRATIONS: MIKE LANGMAN

Field notes on a Desert Wheatear at Mansands, Devon, in 2011: the sketch includes descriptions of the rusty edges to the tertials and shows the pale edges and tips to the greater coverts and median coverts.





Field notes on Long-tailed Skuas describing size, structure and behaviour: as a regular seawatcher I know how important these elements are and how they can often lead to an identification even before some subtle plumage features are seen. Juvenile Pomarine Skua can share many of the characteristic plumage features of a Long-tailed Skua and there can seem to be little difference even in size if viewed at range, so structure in this case is vital.

Feeders' digest

BIRDS have a complex digestive system which may differ slightly between species, usually depending on diet. As birds have a beak rather than teeth, they cannot chew food before swallowing it, so initially food is broken down into the right-sized pieces using the beak.

Some birds will feed at considerable distances from their nest site and have to carry food back. Rather than flying back and forth with small amounts of food, which might make them vulnerable to predation, fewer trips can be made with larger amounts of food.

To enable the maximum amount of food to be 'stowed' on board, birds have a crop, which is an expanded part of the oesophagus situated just before the digestive tract, and which can store food that can be coughed up later. A bird's oesophagus is larger than that of mammals, to enable larger food items to pass through.

Birds with food in their crops look as if they have swollen necks. If they are feeding themselves, rather than chicks, they will gradually allow the food to pass into the stomach to be digested.

Some birds, such as Common Swift, can carry balls of insects in a special throat pouch. These are held together with saliva and can contain thousands of insects. Seed-eating birds have well-developed salivary glands, while fish-eating birds, such as pelicans, have relatively small or non-existent ones. Green Woodpecker has enlarged salivary glands which coat its tongue in a sticky fluid for catching ants.

Recently hatched young birds cannot break up food and so have it ready prepared by their parents. Birds of prey will tear off tiny morsels of meat, before presenting them to their hungry chicks. Seed-eaters may initially feed their young on soft insects before graduating to the hard stuff, while some will regurgitate partially digested seed which has the added benefit of passing on essential gut bacteria to aid digestion. Studies of passerine nestlings show that their enzyme levels change depending on the nature of the diet, with high carbohydrate diets stimulating the right enzymes to digest them, and the same for a high fat diet.

Pigeons and doves have a method of feeding their small young which is unique among landbirds. They secrete a fluid from their crop lining which is known as 'milk', but unlike in mammals, it is produced by both males and females. This substance is regurgitated to feed the young and is high in protein and fat. It also contains antibodies and bacteria which are beneficial and essential to the survival of the chicks. Other species that produce crop milk are flamingoes and penguins.

Some parts of a bird's food cannot be digested and are usually coughed up as a pellet. Owls, birds of prey and shrikes produce pellets that contain fur and bones, gulls produce pellets of fish bones and scales, Rooks can cough up hard cereal husks, and even Robins may cough up a pellet containing beetle carapaces and insect wings. Grebes are known to swallow their own feathers to help them cough up fish bones.

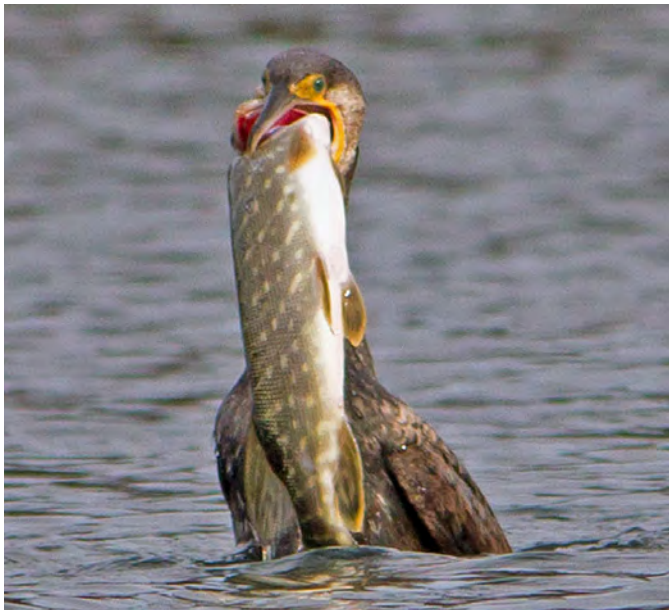
Food passes from the oesophagus to the proventriculus, which is the upper part of the stomach where acids and enzymes are secreted to break down proteins and fats. From here it enters the gizzard, the muscular part of the stomach where food can be ground up. Some birds will have grit in the gizzard to help crush hard food items.

The small intestine is where absorption of food begins, with amino acids, fats and carbohydrates being absorbed as the various enzymes are working. The large intestine is where water is absorbed before the remaining waste matter passes into the cloaca for excretion. Until just before fledging, nestlings have droppings which are enclosed in a mucous membrane, forming a faecal sac which can easily be removed by the parents. ■

JIM ALMOND (WWW.SHROPSHIREBIRDER.CO.UK)

Birds of prey like this Peregrine Falcon will tear up morsels of meat before feeding them to their waiting chicks.

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED



Q I photographed this immature Cormorant taking a young Pike on 2 April (above). The Cormorant had dropped in on a local pond in Derbyshire, creating mixed feelings among the local angling community. As a birder, what amazed me was not only how successful the bird was at catching fish, but the fact that it showed no fear in taking on large fish such as the Pike. It really struggled to lift the fish out of the water and manoeuvre it to the position required for swallowing, but after several minutes, as can be seen from the images, it succeeded. Once it had swallowed the Pike, it swam to a resting place and remained there for over two hours. Is this unusual, or do Cormorants regularly catch and eat such large fish? And would such a large fish provide enough food for the day?
Tony Clarke, via email

A *Dave Stewart* – co-author of Stewart, D C, Middlemas, S J, Gardiner, W R, Mackay, S, and Armstrong, J D. 2005. Diet and prey selection of cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) at Loch Leven, a major stocked trout fishery. *Journal of Zoology* (London) 267: 191-201 – *replies*: "Cormorants feed on a wide range of fish species and sizes, usually limited to what is available and by what they are able to manipulate and swallow. They are commonly reported to consume large fish. There is evidence that it is the older Cormorants – and in particular males – that target large prey. The dietary requirement of an individual Cormorant will vary according to factors such as size and activity of the bird, its maturity, the prey species targeted and the season. Taking these factors into account, it has been estimated that Cormorants require between 540 g and 803 g per day. So indeed, a single large fish would be sufficient food for an entire day."

Q I took this photo (right) of a blue Ring-necked Parakeet with 'normal' green birds on 3 March in my back garden, which backs onto Dagenham Chase LNR, Greater London. I wonder what causes this unusual coloration and if it can be shown in genuinely wild birds?
Steve Drake, via email

A *Hein van Grouw of the Natural History Museum Bird Group, Tring, replies:* "The 'Blue' mutation (which results from the absence of yellow psittacin pigment) in Ring-necked Parakeet is popular and common in captivity. In our collection at the museum we have the very first Blue bird bred in Europe (which died in January 1958), the ancestor of all Blue birds now in captivity.

It is remarkable, considering the large number of different mutations known in captive Ring-necked Parakeets, that in the feral populations in Europe a colour mutation is hardly ever seen. This bird could be an escape, of course, but it is also possible that it hatched in the wild from two feral parents. The mutation Blue is recessive in inheritance, which means that the gene may be present in many birds, but will only show when two gene carriers mate, and even then only in the proportion of 25 per cent of the offspring." ■

The Big Question: murmurations

Q How do murmurations or flocks of Starlings manoeuvre, and why do there appear to be dark and light waves or bands in these flocks? *Kevin Archer, via email*

A *Prof Dr Charlotte K Hemelrijk of the Centre for Ecology and Evolutionary Studies in The Netherlands replies:* "Our computational models show that the manoeuvring of murmurations of Starlings can be reproduced if we assume that the birds follow these precise behavioural rules: they want to flock (co-ordinating by being attracted to others, aligning their headings and avoiding collisions with others); they adjust their movement to at most their seven closest neighbours; they fly; and they want to remain above a roosting site.

The dark and light bands produced when moving away from a predator have been termed 'agitation waves'. These are seen during attacks by birds of prey and reduce the catching success of the raptor in question. Our model suggests that they are observed when individuals copy a specific escape manoeuvre from the nearest two to seven neighbours, and repeat it. The escape manoeuvre is a 'zig' – half of a zigzag as the birds roll sideways – which implies that each bird rolls sideways and back again (see video at **bit.ly/bw276starlings**). The fluctuating dark band reflects the temporary increase of dark surface of the wing we see due to the rolling of the birds." ■

HANS GEBUIS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

The changing dark and light bands in a murmuration of Starlings reflect the position of the wings of the birds as they manoeuvre, research has shown.

Q I took these bird photos (left) in Costa Rica last year, in rainforest about 50 miles south of Puntarenas. A colleague has suggested that the bird top left is a Cooper's Hawk, but I have no idea what the others are. *Alex H Porteous, West Lothian*

A *Peter Jones of* worldwide-birding-tours.com *and a frequent visitor to Costa Rica, replies:* "The top left bird is an immature Common Black Hawk, the second a Bare-throated Tiger Heron (top right), the third is an adult Common Black Hawk (bottom left), and the fourth a Black-bellied Whistling Duck (bottom right)." ■

Q The other day I visited my local pond which is usually full of Mallards and their variants. This bird appeared, but remained distant. I suspect it is a hybrid, or perhaps a Marbled Duck or Mandarin. Any ideas? *David Marshall, via email*

A Birdwatch *ID consultant Keith Vinicombe replies:* "This an aberrant Wood Duck. We always used to call these pale creamy birds 'leucistic', but recent research has changed all that. However, on structure alone, this bird has to be a Wood Duck. The bill is longer and slimmer than that of a Mandarin and, most obviously, it has the long pointed crest of a Wood Duck. In addition, the pattern of the secondaries looks spot on for this species. With the bird being so washed out, it is actually difficult to work out its sex. It has a strong hint of the thick white eyering of a female Wood Duck, but it also shows the white lower border to the mane and a vague hint of a vertical white facial line, both of which are male characters. I'm inclined to think that it must be a male.

Hein van Grouw adds: "I believe that this is a Wood Duck with the mutation known as Brown (called 'Blond' or 'Apricot' among breeders)." ■

Have you got a question for our experts?
Send your queries to us via social media at **www.twitter.com/BirdwatchExtra** or **www.facebook.com/birdwatchmagazine**, on our forums at **www.birdwatch.co.uk/forums**, or by emailing **editorial@birdwatch.co.uk** or by writing in to: **Your Questions Answered, *Birdwatch*, The Chocolate Factory, 5 Clarendon Road, London N22 6XJ.**

Wildlife charities join forces to protect European nature

ONE hundred voluntary organisations across Britain and Europe – including BirdLife International, Friends of the Earth and the Worldwide Fund for Nature – have united as the Joint Links Group to call for the protection of Europe's natural environment, as essential EU legislation comes under threat.

On 30 April the European Commission launched a public consultation on the Birds and Habitats Directives. These wide-ranging laws exist to safeguard the most important wildlife species and habitats in Britain and Europe, and have protected some of the Continent's best-loved and most iconic landscapes for more than 30 years.

Now the directives are officially under review and risk being weakened, endangering habitats from the Scottish Flow County peatlands to the Caledonian pine forests of the Cairngorms, and species large and small, from Capercaillie to Crested Tit.

In response, Joint Links has published a statement warning that the European Commission's REFIT 'Fitness Check' of the directives is the single biggest threat to British and European nature in a generation. It has raised concerns that the directives may be weakened by those who mistakenly regard them as a block to economic growth. Any such revision would currently leave the long-term future of Europe's biodiversity vulnerable to short-term political priorities.

Joint Links has launched 'Nature Alert' to encourage the public to have their say by visiting **www.naturealert.eu** to contribute their protests, opinions and comments. The online tool is available to the citizens of 28 European countries and has been translated into 20 languages.

A spokesperson for the group said:"Scottish environmental NGOs are delighted to join with our colleagues from across the UK to sign this statement. Not only should our amazing wildlife be protected for itself, but it is also hugely economically important in attracting visitors to Scotland and in marketing Scottish produce. Those who see protecting nature as somehow getting in the way of business are often just wrong." ■

• **bit.ly/bw276euronature**

MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

Corncrake is just one of many declining migratory breeders in Europe which is given much-needed protection under the EU's Birds Directive.

News round-up

MAIN STORY

■ **Three male Hen Harriers disappear from Bowland**

England's remnant breeding Hen Harrier population suffered another huge setback with the disappearance of all three adult males this spring, and shooting interests are suspected to be responsible.

• **bit.ly/bw276henharriers**

■ **Australian parrot faces extinction**

The iconic Swift Parrot of Tasmania is facing population collapse and could become extinct within 16 years.

• **bit.ly/bw276swiftparrot**

■ **Is Romania the new Malta?**

As we went to press, Romania was about to approve a law that would allow spring bird hunting and trespassing on private property.

• **bit.ly/bw276romania**

LISTCHECK

Updating avian taxonomy

Redpolls really are all the same

A new genetic study has potentially bad news for listers, as it seems that the many currently accepted forms of redpoll may just be habitat-induced variations of the same species.

Currently, redpolls (genus *Acanthis*) are believed to consist of up to six species, though most accept three, two of which are Holarctic in distribution – Mealy (or Common) Redpoll *A flammea* and Arctic (or Hoary) Redpoll *A hornemanni* – and one of which is a north-west European endemic, Lesser Redpoll *A cabaret*.

The authors of a new paper sampled 77 individuals of each subspecies and species, only to find that any apparent differences were due to the way the genes were expressed according to habitat rather than any reproductive isolation. Based on the fact that the same gene can create different physiological features (such as plumage and bill shape) according to the environmental influences affecting a bird, the study found that there was almost no variation in the molecular make-up of redpolls when compared to the populations of other species, and actual physical variation is constant across the range. Add to this the many known instances of hybridisation/intergradation between redpoll forms, and separation into full species becomes untenable. ■

In association with SWAROVSKI OPTIK

REFERENCE

• Mason, N A, and Taylor, S A. 2015. Differentially expressed genes match bill morphology and plumage despite largely undifferentiated genomes in a Holarctic songbird. *Molecular Ecology*: **doi: 10.1111/mec.13140**.

STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

Learning to identify Mealy Redpolls such as this bird in the field is certainly a test of skill and an interesting pastime, but it may no longer get you a 'tick'.

In the digital edition

JUNE'S digital edition has plenty of extra content, including:

• Movies with songs of Grasshopper, Savi's and River Warblers.

• Footage of rarities and scarcities from across Britain and the region.

• Video and sound files of rare breeders, including the colonising large wading birds.

• Bonus materials for many of the species featured throughout the magazine, including audio and video.

The digital edition is available for PC, Mac, iPhone/iPad and Android. Sample editions are free, and subscriptions or single issues can be purchased. Visit **www.pocketmags.com/birdwatch** to find out more. ■

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Fathers' Day

Male Dotterels are duller than the females and are generally responsible for incubating the eggs and looking after the chicks.

JARI PELTOMÄKI (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

MALE birds have a very busy time during the breeding season. The first job for most is to establish a territory and defend it from rivals, which involves a lot of singing. Next, the bird has to attract a suitable mate or re-establish contact with a previous one, then court the female, which may involve display and feeding, and in some cases build one or more nests for her to choose.

Some of the actions undertaken by males may make them more alluring to prospective partners. Male Penduline Tits build elaborate domed nests to attract a female, and individuals with large nests are more likely to attract a mate and will often breed earlier than rivals with smaller nests. Recent studies show that those males which spend the most time nest-building or build the biggest nests attract females that care more for their offspring.

After mating come the eggs, and it is easy to imagine that when it comes to looking after the eggs and young, it is female birds that do most of the work, but this is not always the case. For most species, both parents do the caring – this pattern of shared work is known to happen in about 75 per cent of bird species and probably happens in a further 6 per cent. There are relatively few species where only one parent does all of the caring and for males alone to care for the eggs and young is rare and only known in about 90 species.

Dotterel and Red-necked Phalarope are two species in which role reversal is complete and even involves the females being brighter, initiating display and courtship. Those species in which this occurs are usually polyandrous, where the female has more than one mate, and leaves one male to look after the nest while she goes in search of another.

Studies show that the hormone prolactin, which regulates incubation, is higher in males of these species and that females will compete intensely for their partners. The main advantage of role reversal seems to be the ability of the female to have several clutches, whereas other species are limited to just one.

With Common and Spotted Sandpipers and Temminck's Stint, the female will incubate the clutch in one nest while males incubate her other nests. In Mountain Plovers, the male incubates the first clutch and the female incubates any second clutch; something similar can happen among passerines such as Robin, where the male cares for the first brood.

In some families, such as woodpeckers, the pair share incubation during the day, but the male alone does it at night. The sharing of incubation duties may vary, even within species, due to circumstances, such as how long one bird has to spend away feeding, or vulnerability to predation.

In many species there is a clear tendency to change over at the nest during dawn and dusk, which may be due to it being a safer time to do so. When it is the female who exclusively incubates, often in polygynous species where the male has many mates, the latter will not be idle as he will bring food to the female and also keep watch for intruding birds and predators.

When providing for their young, some males are better equipped than females. Male sandgrouse, for example, have special breast feathers with more barbules than other feathers, making them better for soaking up water, which can then be transported to their thirsty young.

So let's hear it for all of those male birds which contribute to the raising of their family and ensure there is a new generation of birds for us to watch each year. ■

SUNDAY HIGH TIDES IN JUNE

Full moon date is Tuesday 2 June

	7th	14th	21st	28th
Exe Estuary (Starcross)	10.53	05.33	10.46	04.08
Devon	23.12	18.05	23.00	16.47
Poole Harbour (town quay)	00.22	08.00	00.14	07.08
Dorset	13.16	20.25	13.06	19.40
Langstone Harbour (Northney)	03.27	10.41	03.20	09.30
Hampshire	16.00	23.05	15.49	21.56
Thames Estuary (Sheerness)	04.32	11.29	04.24	10.13
Kent	16.51	23.53	16.38	22.34
London Bridge	05.48	00.08	05.41	11.25
Greater London	18.07	12.43	17.55	23.46
Colne Estuary (Wivenhoe)	04.04	11.09	03.57	09.55
Essex	16.25	23.30	16.13	22.13
Blakeney Harbour	10.44	05.30	10.38	04.29
Norfolk	23.13	17.53	23.02	16.50
Hunstanton	10.19	05.14	10.11	04.09
Norfolk	22.54	17.35	22.42	16.25
Blacktoft	10.50	05.34	10.44	04.31
Yorkshire	23.20	17.57	23.09	16.51

	7th	14th	21st	28th
Teesmouth	07.32	02.28	07.23	01.23
Durham/Yorkshire	20.10	14.48	19.56	13.38
Holy Island	06.20	01.03	06.13	–
Northumberland	18.52	13.31	18.40	12.17
Firth of Forth (Cockenzie)	06.34	07.22	06.22	00.15
Lothian	19.11	19.48	18.54	12.32
Morecambe Bay	03.04	10.14	02.57	09.06
Lancashire	15.32	22.42	15.21	21.37
Dee Estuary (Hilbre)	02.40	09.52	02.34	08.46
Cheshire	15.09	22.20	14.59	21.18
Loughor Estuary (Burry Port)	10.21	11.34	10.12	04.02
Carmarthenshire	22.46	23.59	22.32	16.30
Severn Estuary (Berkeley)	11.58	06.42	11.52	05.32
Gloucestershire	–	19.09	–	18.00
Belfast	02.54	09.54	02.46	08.43
Co Down	15.30	22.26	15.19	21.20
Dublin (North Wall)	03.27	10.36	03.16	09.22
Co Dublin	16.03	23.06	15.48	21.57

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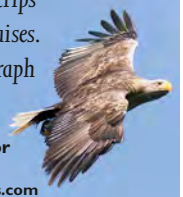

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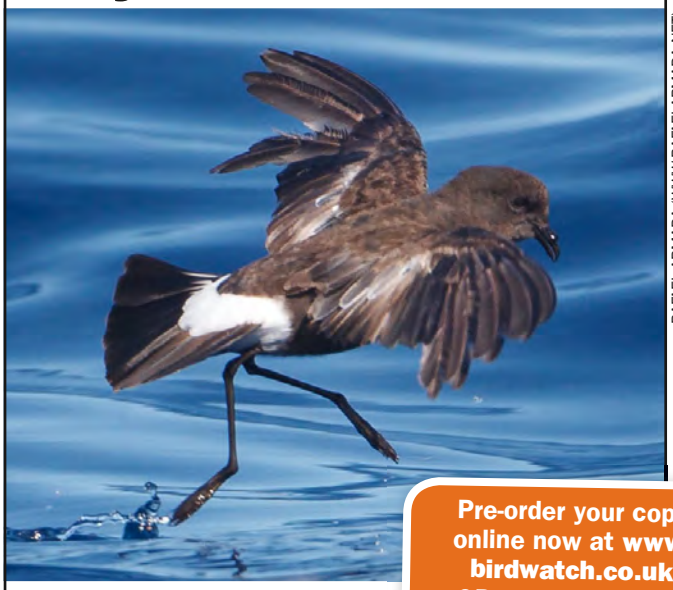

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Rarity retro: Wilson's Storm-petrel
Once a mythical vagrant of the open ocean, Wilson's Storm-petrel was found to be an annual visitor to British waters during pioneering pelagic trips in the South-West Approaches that began in the late Eighties and continue to this day. David Callahan traces the fascinating history of this high-octane petrel.

Sorting shearwaters
As the seawatching season begins, Bob Flood gives expert advice on a perennial problem for those scanning the waves and troughs from shore: identifying the smaller shearwaters, particularly Manx and Balearic, but also the confusion risk posed by potential rarer visitors.

Pelagic directory
Whether for the spectacle of breeding auks in teeming colonies or skuas and shearwaters on the open ocean, there are many ways you can get up close and personal with seabirds this summer. David Callahan rounds up opportunities for pelagic trips around the country.

Mediterranean massacre
It's the story that won't go away – the slaughter of migrant birds that breed across Europe as they pass through the killing fields of Malta, Cyprus and other Mediterranean black-spots. BirdLife International's Martin Fowlie explains the problems and how this year's British Birdwatching Fair will help by raising vital funds.

***PLUS* Portugal's new coastal birding hot-spot, bird art, columns by Bill Oddie, Mark Avery and Lucy McRobert, Steve Young's photo challenge, the latest rarity and scarcity sightings and big stories, Western Palearctic round-up, news, views and reviews, and all your birding questions answered by our expert panel.**

July issue on sale 25 June 2015

your letters & photos

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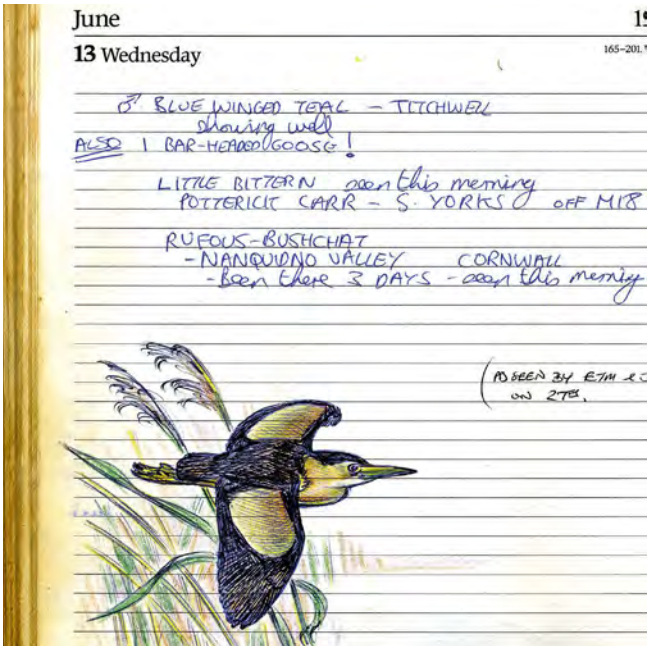
Twitching memories

I very much enjoyed reading Moss Taylor's article The Twitcher Diaries (*Birdwatch* 274: 64-67). It certainly took me down memory lane, but most shocking was how it slowly dawned on me that the familiar-looking writing in the extract from the log book at Nancy's Café on page 64 (right, above Richard Millington's excellent Little Bittern sketch) was actually my own!

13 June 1984 saw me visiting Nancy's Café for some of her legendary bread pudding with a bunch of other student birders, having completed my Ecology degree at the University of East Anglia not far away in Norwich. We had seen the Blue-winged Teal at Titchwell RSPB, Norfolk, earlier that day (plus the Bar-headed Goose!), having driven back from the Little Bitterns at Potterick Carr NR, South Yorkshire, the day before (although I've no recollection of why we didn't go for the Rufous Bushchat in Cornwall).

Good times, and thanks for bringing these memories to life!

John Bowler, via email



After last month's Mike Langman-inspired line drawings (see page 82), Jane Holford Atkin sent us her own action series of dancing Common Cranes from her sketchbook. This talented artist is keeping a year-long diary at Slimbridge WWT, Gloucestershire.

This Moorhen and its chicks reside at the pond at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh, where they were photographed by Robert Bryson.

David Wright took this cracking shot of a male Sparrowhawk on his garden shed in Reading.

Devon delight

AFTER reading about the reintroduction schemes (see *Birdwatch* 273: 36-40), I thought I would send in a photo of a Cirl Bunting which I took while on holiday in south Devon.

At first I thought it was a Yellowhammer, but after close inspection I realised it wasn't! The photo was taken very close to our hotel on Bolberry Down.

It's so encouraging to know that the schemes put in place are working and that birds are thriving in the area – and hopefully in other areas too!

Deborah Eaton, via email

Swan song

MAY I please make a correction to an unfortunate error in the caption to the bottom photograph on page 41 in May's *Birdwatch*?

As stated in the text, it was the female Mute Swan that was of the Polish variety (rather than the male as stated in the caption) – though this does indeed appear as the right-hand bird in the photograph.

Moss Taylor, via email

Thanks

I was thrilled to see my photo of Great Grey Shrike in the May edition of *Birdwatch* magazine – many thanks. ***Tony Davison, via email***

STEVE YOUNG'S PHOTO CHALLENGE

The winner

APRIL'S project was to capture images of the ubiquitous Woodpigeon – but the challenge was to take a photo of this common bird that really stood out.

Steve Young says: "Woodpigeon proved to be another popular subject. There were lots of good entries, including a few showing how tame this species has become.

"The winning shot is this superb image by Ralph Jones of a Woodpigeon taking a bath in a metal pot. Hopefully it was put out for birds to use and not being prepared for dinner! Pigeons are opportunistic birds but this would be taking a real liberty.

"As well as a humorous image with all sorts of 'caption competition' possibilities, it is also a well-exposed and sharp shot and certainly a behavioural one that I haven't seen before.

"Congratulations to Ralph, who wins a copy of *Bill Oddie Unplucked*."

• Turn to page 72 to find out what is this month's photo challenge.

Join the debate online

twitter

• Last month's article from The Sound Approach on the potential split in European Little Owl populations produced this comment:
@YareValleyJus: "Superb article/CD on vocalisation in Little Owl complex in **@BirdwatchExtra**; always struck by *saharae* but hadn't realised calls so different."
@Paul27Thompson: morning – this Robin thinks it's a Kingfisher!

facebook

• On the news that the BTO has launched the Farmland Bird Appeal to fund research into declines:
Ian Smith: "Malta. There: saved research time and effort. Wild bird holocaust."
Dave Barnes: "The NFU should pay, the outcome will be farming practices are causing the decline. Cut to the quick and get them on board with financing a solution."

• We asked about readers' birding plans, and got plenty of response:
Janice Sutton: "Local birding on Saturday, then mega day out to north Wales on Sunday, World's End, Aber Valley and other places time permitting."
Mark Fozzy Foster: "Work, then BTO survey on my local patch."
Namira Wilhelm: "London Wetlands Centre on Monday."
Steve Carter: "A trip to my patch at Crossness for you guessed it – birds!"

• The full species status of Northern Harrier (from North America, and a split from Hen Harrier) has been supported by new DNA analysis:
Ian Smith: "I've always argued that this was the case. Superb."

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MARK AVERY

The hunt goes on

In a recent referendum the Maltese voted to keep spring hunting, but the fight to stop this illegal activity will continue, says *Mark Avery*.

The good guys lost – just – but the campaign goes on.

The people of Malta voted 51:49 in favour of keeping spring hunting in a referendum with a turnout of 75 per cent. That's the trouble with democracy: all those other people who think differently from yourself.

I feel for the staff of BirdLife Malta and all those Maltese who were brave enough to call for an end to the killing of migratory birds. They must have been incredibly disappointed at the result, and the narrow margin will probably have made it worse rather than better.

The referendum was the government's way of parking the issue for a while. Spring shooting is banned by the EU Birds Directive and yet Malta has chosen to ignore this because such hunting is 'traditional'. In the run-up to the vote, the received wisdom was that outside voices exhorting the Maltese to vote against spring hunting would likely be counter-productive, and so the rest of the European Union's bird conservation organisations kept largely quiet. There is little way of knowing whether things would have been better or worse if those outside voices had been nagging away – I think we have to trust the local views on a matter like this.

ROBERT CARDELL

The outcome of the referendum ensures that many more birds – like this female Kestrel with wing damage – will be harmed or killed in Malta.

Horrible times

Bill Oddie described the result as a "depressing comment on humanity" and said that "we live in horrible times where horrible men ... go out killing wildlife for no reason whatsoever". That seems fair enough.

There are calls for us all to boycott Malta since tourism is important to the island's economy, and British tourists are the largest single contribution, although since there aren't many live birds to see, the people who care most about this issue probably don't currently visit much anyway.

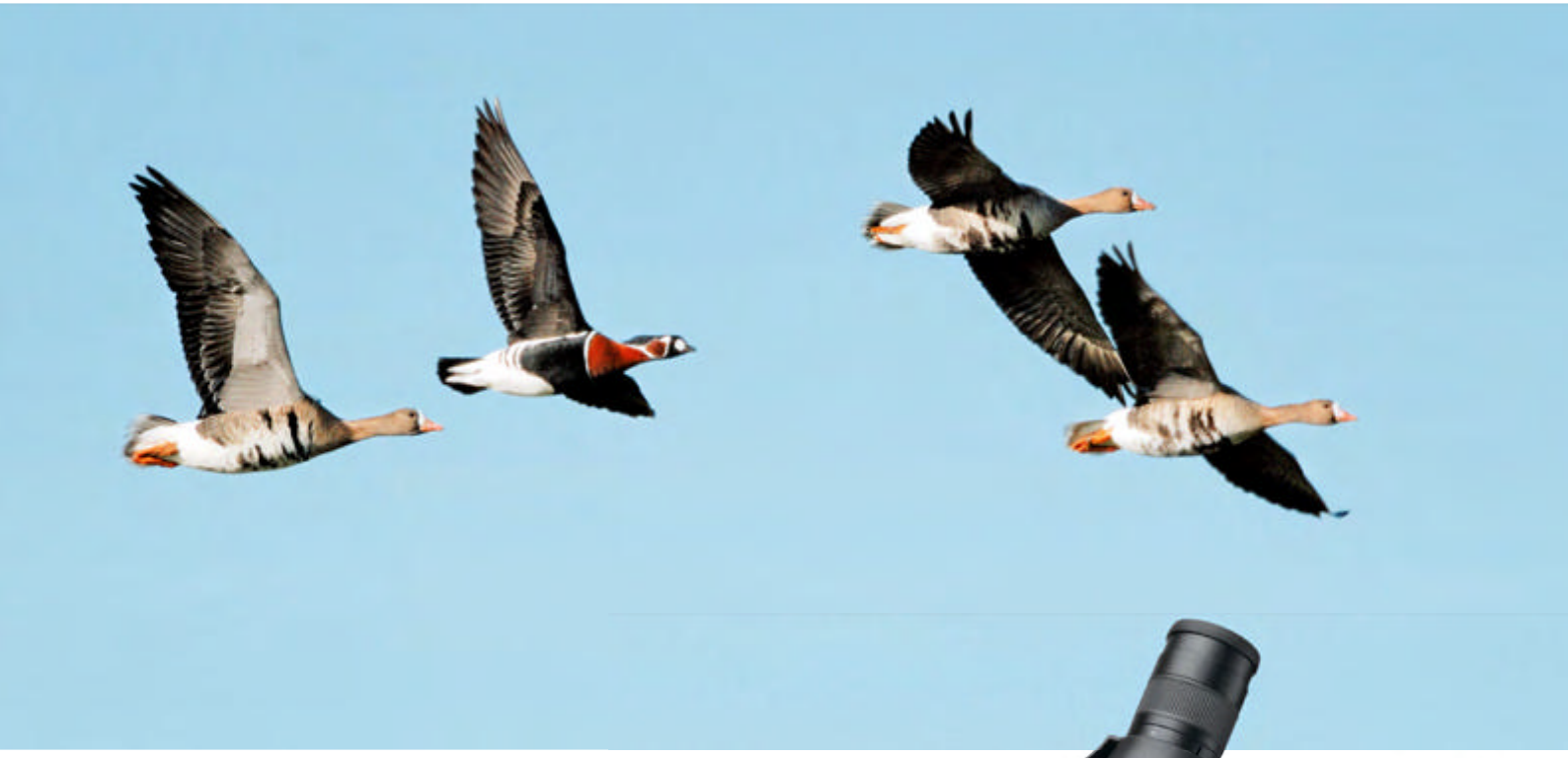
I suspect that it will be political pressure that eventually works. Malta should not be allowed to get the benefits of EU membership while opting out of wildlife protection laws. Since all EU Member States are breaking some of the conditions of the various directives it won't be the Member States who make waves for Malta, but the Commission.

> "Spring shooting is banned by the EU Birds Directive and yet Malta has chosen to ignore this because such hunting is 'traditional'"

Of course, the EU Environment Commissioner, Karmenu Vella, is Maltese, and so he is in the embarrassing position of being responsible for a Birds Directive which outlaws spring hunting, while his countrymen continue to break this law. Over the last five years the Commission has dealt with more than 1,700 environmental infringements by its 27 (now 28) Member States. Italy and Spain have been the worst offenders, with the UK a poor 19th out of 27, whereas The Netherlands has been consistently the best performer. Malta has, according to this crude measure, the sixth-best environmental record – it seems time to look more deeply into Malta's environmental performance. ■

Do this in June

- Donate to BirdLife Malta – even a small financial gift will be a tangible sign of moral support for its work. Here is the link: **www.birdlifemalta.org/Content/donate/972/**.
- Comment on the Facebook page of the EU Environment Commissioner, Karmenu Vella, at **www.facebook.com/PeritKarmenuVella** and ask him about his plans to enforce the EU Birds Directive in his own country.



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